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WYLAND, BERTHA HARRIS. Confessions of Cherubino. (1967)
Directed by: Guy Owen. pp. 271

Confessions of Cherubino is a novel concerning the characteristics and varieties of love, both physical and abstract, as represented by members of a single family. Music, generally, is the chief device used to unite, concretely and symbolically, these diverse individuals; specifically, the aria "voi che sapete" from Mozart's Marriage of Figaro, sung in the opera by the adolescent Cherubino, is woven, in various guises, through this novel as an expression of its theme. The characters interact through habitual modes in the family relationship, revealing themselves through violence, exotic sexual behavior, and through extraordinarily blunt inner monologues that have an active effect on people both living and dead who surround them. All such action, however, is achieved in an atmosphere of ordinary tenderness, separating it from any hint of glamor or abnormality that might be rendered in a more conventional description. The unusual, divorced from all possible shock value by its inclusion as simply another stream flowing throughout dailiness, becomes, possibly with even greater sensation, the usual. The situations of the book are balanced entirely on its last sentence: that the characters, in conclusion and also in beginning, are "approaching the conditions of perfect love."

CONFESSIONS OF CHERUBINO

by

Bertha Harris Wyland

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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Approved by

Dan Owen
Director

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis Director _____

Oral Examination Committee Members _____

_____

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_____

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She lay on the beach and felt the sun take her apart, slowly, slipping first through the snaps of the bathing suit, itself the color of sun, and withdrawing the halter and the pants into its glaring body. "And now..." she said through her dry lips. And then, pausing just for breath or to resist a cloud, the sun licked at the tanned pores, sipping at each of them, and leaned on the rough nipples of her breasts and went to sleep.

She opened her eyes. "Margaret," she said, polishing the sun's back with the sound of her own name and taking him against her belly with her arms. Because the sun was a young one, only a nine o'clock sun, it was finished quickly and her face ran with sweat. She sat up, pulling the halter straps back to her shoulders. Her breasts resisted, and she smiled down at them and pulled until they pressed again against the yellow cotton. She took her eyes off her body, but her body could not take itself away from Margaret. Her elbows had gone off the towel and were jabbing, two sensitive bones, into the hard-packed, pebble-studded sand. But she was as dizzy as a drunk from too much of the sun, and she could not move her elbows yet. Her toes pointed toward the water; her eyes followed their direction. The bay before her was a sparkling blue blanket of salt, moving occasionally and kicking up flashing mirrors into her eyes.

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The sun rode above it, spurring the water closer every moment to the shore, to Margaret, for whom the sun would dismount. She moved her fingers and then bent her knees. She was a tired old woman stumbling from the heat to the water, a tired old woman in a yellow bathing suit.

She had been there on the beach every day for a week and finally knew enough to be bold with water. She shut her eyes and plunged, almost fainting, from the heat into the cold. When she surfaced, away from a vision of thumb-sized minnows swimming into her face and the presence of brown, cloudy stones, she saw that she was alone in the water, all this blue bay of water was hers alone, that she was the swimmer for the world, that she was the fish to swim and bite and gulp the water while the sun stood by overhead like a sun to shake her fins and scales with occasional light while she stroked the water, the water entered her, while she swam for yards or miles on either side without touching human, fleshly legs, without seeing a fur-trimmed intelligent eye gape into her dumb, fish one through the towers of seaweed that shot green and yellow sparks into her face and wrapped her shoulders in long-dead female hair. She dove and came up for breath again, and dove again and breathed the air again, her face pointed out of the water like a dolphin's snout, her long alive yellow hair like the seaweed rising, by mistake, for sun at each breath. Stroking and breathing,

cupping her hands into fins, she drew towards the middle of the bay and danger where, if she stood on the bottom, three tall men could stand on her shoulders and only the third could breathe, barely. But she continued, feeling fear and cold make her swim all the more steadily and tirelessly, the hair on her head plastering her face at each gaping suck for air, her legs churning and making paddle-wheels to move the death ship forward, until at last her legs and arms stopped and she lay still and face down, watching the bubbles of the last breath escape her and then letting herself be moved into the current, floating like bleached driftwood, the dead man's float. She flipped to her back with her last strength. The shore was invisible, or perhaps her eyes were blind. What fish can see out of water? She floated, the sun sat on her eyelids, wanting them to open too, to take her there through the sex of her sight. Her lungs roared for air like old engines that wished only rust and a scrap-heap for eternity, not abuse by life any longer, by a woman who turned old and young by turns, a woman who imagined herself as she lay in the sand something chosen by some god for love, who imagined herself a fish that sneered at poor lungs until of course it was hooked and discovered, as it thrashed at the toe of a rubber boot, some use for air, for the motions of in and out. The lungs roared, she was making them go, the damned woman who lay alone in small beds until she

made them gasp while she sobbed through so many nights for arms around that case of lungs and lullabies of sleep baby sleep from a faceless wonder who would wipe the eyes and fluff the pillow and cover the baby and smooth the hair until the lungs could make her sigh and snore; or that damned woman who made the breaths come shorter and shorter until the lungs panted, made into animal lungs by someone atop her until the fool of a woman compressed the lungs altogether, took them into death only for a moment, but who could tell when the moment might never end, all for one cry of pleasure.

Her trailing fingers rubbed bottom, and some sand and loose pebbles dashed into the bottom of her bathing suit. She lay back and ached her flesh into something of a salty sand-pit and believed her hair was nothing but another seaweed jungle where those throngs of kindergarten minnows, all black and bunched together as though the rest of the sea didn't exist, all together in a hand-sized pool of shallow water, could swim, in and out. She turned her head and opened her eyes and snapped her fingers through the water to deceive the fish, who believed in dead bodies, in feasts; and she wondered how the thousands of tiny mouths would feel as they pulled and nursed the skin away from her belly. She hobbled out of the water like an exhausted old woman hunting for a bed and medicine and found her towel and sunglasses closer to the water, or the water closer to them. She shook

the mud and stones from her pants and composed herself, chic and slim in the contraption of wires and shirred cloth that covered, she laughed at that, that covered her salient points, and became the masked stranger queen at the masked ball behind the green glass, the white rims, of the sunglasses. But there was still no one on the beach to wonder at her, until the shrill, cut-glass voices of children, soaked in the salted, heated air, like her own skin, children's voices her own skin, she believed, cried: "A swan! A swan! A swan!" and six feet, the sixth foot jerking and wobbling against the perfect spinning progressions of the other five, one tire gone bad on a good car, kicked sand against her belly, her breasts, and missed her face because her chin came up and took the blow. She felt it as a blow, a few grains of sand against her pointed chin, she felt as a blow. What swan? she thought; Ellen, what swan? Ellen came rushing, or not rushing, stumbling, the way she explained her guts stumbled, her heart stumbled all day long as she looked out for a glimpse of the one she loved from the first class to the last dark bite of dinner; Ellen came stumbling into Margaret's gray dormitory room and said I have to tell you, my friend, or I'll go mad, how much I love, the way love feels, the feel of love.

"Get out of the way!" Margaret screamed at the children. They moved aside, their first order of the day, shuffling

in the sand, the two girls pulling prissily at the tops of their bathing suits to cover the faint dots of spilled coffee, hardly nipples, but their own, their own, that had slipped, in their dash for the water, to their babyish pot bellies. They moved aside so that Margaret could see, the crippled girl's left hip jutting out farther and farther, as though she would throw the whole beach off balance and send the four of them falling off the edge of the world. The boy, the youngest, moved slowest, insolent in his tight trunks, but not tight enough to show a thing, and before he moved bobbed his shaved head at her and stuck out his tongue. The crippled girl threw her arms around him and pulled his face against her jutting hip, punishing him, but Margaret could see the swan coming. It came through the water, so close to shore, so negligently paddling through the streamer of sun through the water that she could have moved to it easily, just up to her knees, and if she did not fear being bitten or beat to death by those heavy green wings; she could have lifted the swan and let its neck coil around her own. Green wings. She pulled off her sunglasses, and the swan in a complete dazzling turn of white throat looked at her, giving her one thing, one quick white look through the little corridor of children and sand before it turned again and stared down at the water it paddled. How did it get there? A swan swimming through salt water, practically on

top of a bathing beach put together by the WPA, a place where policemen took their families, where carloads of Italians set up tables and chairs and stoves and blankets and umbrellas and playpens and radios and portable televisions as far from the water, as close to their cars, as they could and where their adolescents broke away from them and ate their meals at the hamburger stand behind the lifeguards and sat at least ten yards away from their shouting, fat relations; watched the girls in their bleached hair come close to them in their dark hair. How did the swan get there, at such a place? How did Margaret, such a girl, get there, so sleek, such a strong, easy swimmer seeking the danger points of the water past the fat bumblers in the shallows; Margaret and the swan, away from everything that wanted to love them and call them their own, their dear, sleek and white own, what were they doing in this salt water?

Who do you love? Margaret said, and looked up from her book in its pool of desk lamp light; and on second thought closed her book. She looked at Ellen through the dark of the rest of the room and Ellen (although she was not one for dramatic gestures, although she loved the drama) stood hanging on to the doorknob, one long slim hand hanging on the doorknob, one long slim hand hanging on to the cloth above where she thought her heart might be. Her hands, she called them, my vanity of vanities. Margaret wanted to know

more than anything whom Ellen loved, but even then could not help thinking how they looked, the two of them, the two beauties of them, Ellen in the dark by the door, Margaret, herself in the half-shadow of the lighted desk: Ellen with her white skin and her black hair that went down and down her back and further down her back, further and further, when she stroked it, as she often did with her two gleaming vanities of vanities; and Margaret with golden skin even in the drab winter and golden hair that went down as far as Ellen's and which she never touched because she liked to think of all the people who wished to touch it, who longed to touch it if they only could. The perfect friends, no beauty and the beast about it, said their satellites, the too-fat, too-thin, spotted-faced, the other schoolgirls who looked mostly bad or at best middling in and out of their clothes, generally mistakes of clothes, while look at them, they said, have you seen them come out of their showers, naked as lilies, like lilies, both of them, and not even a glance in the mirror on the way to their rooms, not like us, they said to each other, or didn't say: just held their coffee cups after a long evening of books or movies and moving their thoughts about Ellen and Margaret back and forth among themselves. Not like us, they thought, or said, having to hide most Saturday nights in this hell-blasted girls' school or go out with something that's at best majoring in Business

Administration or an Art major who might start to weep if you begin putting it on a bit passionate.

A few thought, the few who crept in and out of each other's beds, passing up the coffee for each other's arms in dark, illegally-locked rooms while the phonograph spun Liszt and Rachmaninoff and around and around and the rest remembered not to knock, not even to borrow some sugar; they thought, there must be something, you know it, don't you darling, like us, those two talk in a language of their own, like the language of flowers, one, Ellen usually, says something like 'But I, alas, do not know how to see sheep through the walls of boxes. Perhaps I am a little like the grown-ups.' And then the other one, Margaret, looks through all that yellow hair falling over her face, that hair! Christ, I can taste it just thinking about it--and without a pause, just keeps spooning up her dreadful dinner along with the rest of us, and answers: 'I have had to grow old.' And I know The Little Prince as well as the next, but you know, how do you draw that kind of thing out of your head, and there wasn't a word between them before, but after they've said something like that, they laugh or smile and reach over and pat each other's hands as though they were ending a whole night's conversation. But they never break a rule like we are, though it's not on the books, the rule we're breaking, I don't think--you can walk in either room any time of the

night--and I have, sometimes just to see either of them lying there in the moonlight—and there they'll be alone in bed, as composed and lovely as sleeping beauties or Ophelias drifting dead through the water with all their flowers around them. Though God knows what the two of them have ever suffered. Have you looked in their closets? I think Vogue magazine is put out entirely for them. And they rip something off the hook every morning, throw it over their heads, and without a look in the mirror--they don't own a lipstick between them, but not in the way I don't want one, darling--they go tripping off to talk Latin with the head of the department, fresh as sunflowers, smiling, not grumbling a bit over being yanked out of bed at dawn, or their stomachs tight and turning over with desire because they haven't been able to get it the night before--you see it in their faces--desire, the sun and the cold of it, turns lilies black and makes the sunflower petals wrinkle and droop before night, but what do flowers, like those two, ever want? They simply get it, without ever knowing they wanted anything in the first place. No hands or mouths or sex--flowers don't have them, none of these things. God help them when they wake up some morning and find themselves desiring. I hope it will be each other. God knows they deserve to stink like the rest of the world.

"Who do you love? Ellen come in, over here," said Margaret and waited for her to begin that long glide, that

pale, unruffled swoop across the floor and the dark, bobbing the dark head above the pale skin. But she was sorry when Ellen did. "What's happened to you?" Margaret asked, asked with her breath sucked down to her gut, because Ellen was coming wounded, wobbling across the floor, perhaps with a bullet, or something, in her body, that damaged her gait and caused her skin to redden with something, blood, thought Margaret, some strain of blood they had never learned was in their bodies, that blotched the ivory, that shook the reflecting glass between them at each of her steps until Margaret, when Ellen was at her side, reaching out with her hand, drew back and turned her eyes down because she knew she was going to be tainted with some disease that had begun to wilt Ellen already, was sinking her with leaded hunks of disease until she could never swim back to health, the shore where Margaret was going to be alone. Was it love she had said?

Ellen took her hand. Margaret snatched it back and rushed into the gap with words, "Listen, Ellen: 'Though beauty be the mark of praise,/ And yours of whom I sing be such...' Listen here! Aren't you answering me?" But Ellen's eyes were discovering the white window curtains of Margaret's room, curtains she knew as well as her own, the brass bowl of apples that she had shared for four years, but her eyes were asking if she had ever tasted one before. "I'd like," she said, her voice like the drone of a summer bee, no purity

about it, but loaded with sweets, heavy with greed for more and more, "to sink my teeth in that apple and never let them up again, to feel it become part of my flesh, the little black seeds and all, until a twisted apple tree grows out of my belly, downward toward the earth, growing through my thighs--forget the sky and the sun--burying its leaves in the earth until the green turns white, the long roots turning through all my arteries until it is strong enough to drag me through the mud with it, until both of us spread around the earth underground and we own it all, the tree and the fruit and I together."

"Then I'll answer for you. What's happened to you? You make me nervous as a cat. Listen: '...As not the world can praise too much,/ Yet is it your virtue now I raise.'"

"Virtue?" said Ellen, and made a movement so clumsy it could have come from a mortal. The apples spilled and rolled into the shadows; the brass bowl clanged against the floor. "Listen to me. This morning I got up, still the same as you. I was singing, you know, "Odi et Amo," you know, the way a child sings Here we go round the mulberry bush, senselessly, thinking I was going to ask Miss Hart about how we could set some of the poems to music--Catullus is nothing but singing anyway--or so I thought when I got up this morning. I threw on my clothes, happy with the idea of it all, happy because it was spring..."

"It's still spring this evening," said Margaret.

"It was spring this morning, and I got to breakfast, and out, before you... When I saw you after the first class, what was I wearing?"

"What you're wearing now? I don't remember. Why would you change?"

"No. No, not what I'm wearing now. I had to change. You'll see."

"Why?"

"You'll see. And I was thinking, after noon, we'll both be free and we'll go in the woods and slosh through the mud and watch the earthworms ooze up and play some game, a running game, and come home with bunches of Japanese Iris and their smell would drive us wild while we studied tonight, because we did that last year, remember, the flowers' scent would go up in our heads through our noses and mouths, smells you could taste on your tongue--the taste of blue, the taste of periwinkle, the taste of yellow, of white, the furry taste of green--until we knew we could never do the equations right until we got rid of those flowers, those tastes. And we did. One, or both of us, opened the window wider and tossed them on the grass. And we closed that window tight and got back to work. I thought we would do the same this year, but being a whole year older, I thought we could do the flowers and the equations at the same moment, you know, take pleasure

and labor together in one gulp. But we'll never know about that now."

"Why not? There's tomorrow, there was today, but I couldn't find you all afternoon. I had the same idea, that's funny, but I did. Why are you so strange tonight? Never in my life. Look at yourself!"

They got up and Ellen stumbled, Margaret glided, to the mirror above the bureau. They watched Ellen's hands move in the glass through her hair, down her face, the fingers touching the eyes and the mouth, which seemed swollen, as if it had wept for a long time, and the beautiful hands went on down her body, exploring, grasping at the flesh through the cloth, squeezing her breasts, clenching at her waist, until the fingers found nothing but each other. She twined all ten together and held them up, hiding her face from the mirror and from Margaret.

"Have you ever..." she whispered from behind her hands.

"Ever what?"

"Got into bed at night aching for something, not knowing exactly what but remembering things like 'For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,' and..."

Margaret smiled; the old Ellen. She said, "'Or chide my palsy, or my gout, My give grey hairs, or ruined fortune flout;' But, dear, we're young; what do you mean, do you think you'll die when you get to bed and close your eyes to

sleep? What is it? Ever what?"

"It's not being young or old." She turned on Margaret, her hands moving like claws around Margaret's face, as if she would tear her eyes out for being ignorant, for being blind. Her hands stopped when they found the bland golden armour of Margaret's hair, knowing nothing like her hands could ever give Margaret sight or understanding. She went on, her voice still in the bee's monotone, her eyes on her own face in the mirror. "Get into bed smelling something growing through your belly, up through your skin, until the stench of it is all over you, shut up with you under the covers and the sheets, and all the words you've ever read about women and men make pictures in your mind that cover every other thought, until you begin to do something about it and soon you're wrenching and groaning like some animal and then you go to sleep. But you don't know, I can tell."

"What animal are you talking about, Ellen? You know what they say, they say you look like a swan when you walk down the street and someday they think you'll just take flight and leave us all."

"And you. They say you're nothing but the essence of summer, made out of sunlight. But Margaret, maybe you're the coldest summer they've ever had. An essence. What can an essence know about, feel about sex?" They walked back to the bed and sat down, Ellen's shoulders humped for the first

time in her life, her head hanging, going on with it in that monotone. "At ten o'clock I was at Miss Hart's studio knocking on the door, hearing the sopranos singing, repeating over and over, 'Odi et Amo' and finally a contralto picking up the rest of the words, over and over, until the listeners could be sure of what it meant. Then, I didn't know what it meant. All I heard was those sopranos, saw them standing there on the stage in long white dresses, and then she opened the door. In ten minutes I was calling her Janet."

"Why?"

"Because that's her name. She didn't have that same old wreck of a dress on she always wears, she had on a soft old blue shirt and black trousers, she said later she had worn all that to give herself courage. But her courage was all liquid and all inside. You'll see what I mean. God knows even the piano keys stank of bourbon and she could hardly focus her eyes, ice-blue eyes coming out of that crazy Indian chief face, and she went for me, Margaret, and I left all those sopranos outside the door wailing away again and again on 'Odi et Amo,' the minute I felt it and got what she meant in my lungs. The smell of it."

"The whiskey? Did you drink with her?"

"No. The smell of sex. I only drank with her later. Everything was like silk flowing over you until you weren't sure where the fabric began, where it ended, when your legs

turned to water or when your heart stopped beating or else pounded like a hammer in your chest."

"Tell me," said Margaret, "how did you know these things? Where did you find them out? Why haven't you told me before?" She felt colder and colder, more than ever a summer sun wrapped in cold rain clouds. How did it feel?

"I didn't know. I only knew when it was happening and when it was over and I was crying like a fool on her bony, bare shoulder feeling like some ancient hag all of a sudden, feeling dead leaves in my hair and my skin turned to yellow wrinkles and my teeth all black or gone. I felt old, Margaret, but so happy at the same time that I could only cry about it on her shoulder. And then she misunderstood, or did understand, and said that she should be hung, that I should go ahead and tell the dean immediately and get her kicked out quite properly. And then I saw how sad she was, all that talk about ruining innocence and how the signs in the museums, hands off the sculpture, don't touch the oil paintings, were good and right, by God, she said, they should hang them on people like me, on everything good and beautiful to keep people like her from breaking and smudging the happy line, she called it, the happy line. And then I got scared, because instead of crying, she braced her hands against the wall and began beating her head against it until I thought that even in those sound-proofed studios the

clarinet next door would be walking in any second. And how did I know all of a sudden to be afraid? And how did I know what to do? What I did?"

"What? Why didn't you just leave?"

"Are you crazy? I've never been so happy in my life. How could I let someone make me so happy and simply slam the door behind me? But how could you know."

"But you said, and you are, look at yourself, how old, how awkward you suddenly are."

"I know. But I suddenly saw then how old and awkward and savage she's always been and how coming to me, taking me apart as she did, she had taken some of me into herself, the part I've lost, and she was very beautiful and very young when she lifted her head, when it was over. And then I thought, then I will give her more. First I gave her my beauty and now I will clear off the sadness and blame and give her happiness, and I did, and I went over and started it all over again, so that we could share what we both had between us equally. And that's what happened. And after that, she went to the piano and played it the way no one could ever have played it before, and I sat beside her as she played, and that was mine, too, another gift to replace the lost tooth or to shake another dead leaf out of my hair."

"But they're still there, Ellen. You are different and old."

"But I don't think so, you see, I don't feel so."

The two friends looked at each other silently. Through the halls the sounds of bedtime were coming. Doors were slamming, water was running in the tubs and showers. Bedroom slippers clopped up and down on the floors. Girls coming back from the library were climbing the last flight of stairs slowly.

Margaret moved, feeling every muscle and bone slide with the suppleness they had always owned. She knew, she could feel, that if Ellen were moving, her flesh would sound out with aches and creaking joints. Margaret pushed the window up and leaned out. Above the campus, resting its tail of cloud on the chimney of the dormitory across the street, a silver moon, as transparent as the spring air itself, hung. The trees in the close wood rustled their baby leaves together. Lights were going out. A car turned a corner softly with the comforting sound of going home. Down in the woods, the Japanese Irises they hadn't picked were still growing in the dark. The mud was drying. The new grass was blanketing the air with scents that did not bear the imprint of either Margaret or Ellen. This is still all mine, she thought. I can walk through the woods tomorrow and still see nothing but a tree before me. If Ellen came, she would see a face behind the tree and a clump of flowers would become someone's hands. When she hears that music from now on, she will hear nothing but the ways of a drunken

old woman in it. Tomorrow I'll go down to the woods by myself and take possession. She's given the whole kingdom to me. Next week at graduation she'll give me the Latin prize because now she is too tired to study. Wouldn't her mother be sad if she knew? My mother is so proud of me. But her heart ached with missing Ellen. Her heart lay on the pale grass outside in the dark and ached to have her friend back. Ellen's the one who had cut the heart out, but Margaret was not strong enough to bring it back up to beat inside her chest again. She looked back into the room. Ellen was going quietly to the door, dragging her hand slowly behind her against the wall.

"You didn't tell me. Is she who you love?"

Ellen, back in the dark around the door, leaned against the wall.

"Yes. She's half of it. But you've only heard the half of it." Her voice came out of the dark, a stranger's voice. "That's enough for tonight. If you care, I'll say the rest tomorrow. Now forget me and go brush your hair as many strokes as you always do and stand in the shower and put on your white nightgown, the one with the bands of lace above your breasts, and lie down in your neat bed. Breathe slowly three times and you, dear Margaret, will go to sleep as you always do, with the moon shining on your sheets and your dreams will go past your eyes like birthday party

balloons. Good night."

"Ellen, what are you going to do?" Ellen leaned back through the door for a moment.

"I'm going to lie down with my hair still tangled, my teeth dirty, my hands still smudged with ink, all my clothes still on, and I'm going to squeeze my eyes shut, and remember, remember until I start to pant like a thirsty dog again, just from memory. My window is going to be tightly closed tonight. And no moon is going to come inside my room."

Margaret moved toward dark Ellen, Ellen in the dark. "Wait," she said. "Please take me with you. I'll stay in your room tonight with you. I feel, I just feel for a reason I don't know that you won't be safe alone. I'll sit at the end of your bed all night and keep watch. Ellen, I know, I know! From now on it won't be safe for you to sleep in the dark alone."

Ellen smiled at her, from a long distance away, and then she went away. Margaret, alone by the door, watching Ellen lurch through the shadowy, now empty hall, felt panic begin growing up through her like weeds, beginning to choke the sane cheer that had flowered in her from birth. Cheer went rolling down the hall following Ellen's heels. And now that it was out and she could see it, what was it but a used-up infant's ball, a silly thing painted with teddy bears and mother's kisses and hearts and posies that looked huge only

in a baby's mitts. Now that it was outside her for the first time, she saw that it could fit neatly between Ellen's toes and heel, a thing she could close her high, arched instep over and still continue to walk where she was going. Shiny, round cheer gone, and a burden of panic to replace it that was hard and had sharp edges, that bit into her throat and compressed her lungs. Margaret's lips hung open in a stupid, unlovely way. Her eyes felt hot and red.

She went back to her room, shut the door and leaned against it. Ellen gone into the dark where love was. So that was where love was. And love's hands spoiled the skin and rubbed Ellen's clear eyes until they were red-veined with ecstasy. Her straight limbs stumbled now. At the top of the craggy mountains, hung with mist and spider webs and thick forests, a traveller rode through the dark looking for a bed and a roof for the night. At last, sick with weariness and dread of the hideous shapes he imagined he saw behind each tree, he came to a castle, ugly in all its aspects, but where he was welcomed in and given a fire and bed and food. Late in the night, as the traveller slept, his host, a white-faced count with long, sharp teeth and burning eyes that seemed to have no age at all, appeared in the traveller's room at the foot of his bed clothed in the guise of smoke or the wings of the bat. The traveller shook with fear and loathing as the vampire bent over his throat, baring his teeth, searching

out the particular vein filled with the richest blood. The traveller fainted into his pillows, the vampire stretched out his length against the victim and sucked until his desire was filled. A fly on the wall, knowing nothing of the facts, saw nothing but an ordinary act of love. In the morning, the innocent traveller was as much a vampire as if he had been born to it. Margaret, shaking, thought she could see, even now, the long teeth at Ellen's throat. She tore her clothes off, ripping the pink wool, scuffing the black leather. At the bottom of her jewel box she found the charm she was looking for, the little silver cross Daddy had given her when she was twelve. Vampires ran screaming back to their graves at the sight of it. Better, even better, to weave a wreath of garlic, another protection for Ellen to wear all night around her neck. Not even the strongest vampire could crash through two charms of Good. Wrapped in a blanket, Margaret held the cross and her face up through the window, pointed toward the moon. Shreds of cloud ran a race through the light that was nearly as strong as morning's. She could almost see, perhaps did see, the black spot against the pale sky grow larger, begin to flap its wings as it came in slow, circling descent to the room at the other end of the hall. She must hurry. Any moment, the shape would grow larger, blacker than the night, blacker than the blind at Ellen's window until it engulfed the window and landed with

a clapping of wings, bent over the sleeping body of her friend. She went, the blanket trailing behind her like an antique cape, down the hall, the thoughts chattering silently through her teeth. The gleam of the cross around her neck will make him snap his teeth shut and screech like a bat out of hell. A bat out of hell. And I'll be there at the bottom of the bed wrapped in my white blanket, my eyes open wide all night long, I, Margaret, still purer than the driven snow, whose mind no evil thought has ever employed, whose body is still straight, unstunted with the means of love--and all darkness and hell will cringe at the sight of me and leak back into the night through the walls' cracks. And my face will bring morning around, I'll wrap morning around her, and she'll wake up in the light and find that she has been safe because of me.

Margaret opens the door without knocking and finds it just as Ellen said it would be. She is sprawled on her bed like an abandoned, worn-out doll, its painted eyes rubbed from brown to beige, its mouth that used to be red and round and smiling now nearly a white line. The stuffing is falling out of her head. Her dress is a rumpled rag wrapped around her thighs. Yet she sleeps like a tired child, flat on her stomach, her palms flat on the pillow, on either side of her head. The window, too, is closed; the blind drawn shut.

Margaret thinks, then does it, It's better that the

window be open, the blind all the way up. I don't want it sneaking through the cracks in the form of smoke or gas. It's better that it come direct and enormous through a wide-open space, and I will know it immediately.

"What in God's name are you doing here?" She wakes up suddenly in the glare from the moon and finds Margaret crouched in white wool at the end of her bed. Her voice is cracked with sleep and bent by some dream.

"Be quiet, Ellen. Let it think you're asleep and then it will come sooner and I'll get rid of it sooner. We won't have to sit and be afraid all night long."

Ellen sits up and shakes her invisible hair back; not entirely invisible--a particle of moonlight illuminates one strand as though it were the night sky.

"It's the vampires and Count Dracula again, isn't it? Oh, go back home and to bed, love. We went through all this last spring, and remember, we found out eventually none of it is true, that it's just something some slobbering village idiot dreamed up a million years ago to scare the rest of the poor bastards out of their socks on long winter evenings. Go back to bed and cut it out." Her voice is gentle, dribbling back towards sleep again as she speaks. Margaret's eyes are even wider.

"You used to believe," she says, "you used to take the precautions. Remember the Tolstoi story about the whole

family, all infected one by one, even the little child? Doesn't it still scare you?"

"Not any more. Maybe it never scared me enough." She leans back into her pillow again, wishing Margaret would go away and join her past, her childhood where she belongs. Get back there in the fairy-tale book, she thinks. There's still an old picture of me there that you can still admire, that will keep you company until you grow too big for it yourself. "Tolstoi was just a fool for village idiots," she says.

Margaret is becoming anxious, she begins to sweat with fear inside her wooly cocoon. "Come on, Ellen. Don't you remember how we lay here on your bed night after night, wearing our silver crosses, all the lights burning? We left the window open so that it wouldn't seep through the cracks and be even worse, clouding the room and our eyes with the smoke of itself. We hung garlic bulbs at the window. What did you ever do with the garlic? Did you throw it out?"

"Threw it out," Ellen murmurs. Her eyes are closing again. The good dream is coming back. Her body is being baked in an oven of arms. Her whole past life rushes before her eyes: she is drowning. Beneath the water, there is a reflection of the old world that she has left behind; each rock, building, tree and person is lifting another, a fresh face, to her own. The new world is preparing to kiss her

lips. Instead, that heavy hand. Shake, shake.

"Now please try and keep your eyes open." Margaret's voice again, nearly in tears, from fear, from whatever keeps her sweating and trembling inside the white blanket.

For a moment, Ellen keeps her head high, her eyes open. There is Margaret, she thinks, my priestess, goddess of my other self, crouched there, framed there in heaven's silver. Let us go into the House of the Lord. Her eyes are transparent tonight; through them I see all my past. Her eyes, my past, propped open with toothpicks of fear. Look at her, waiting for the two red toothmarks on my jugular vein to bubble forth with blood. Look at her, propped up on God's platform, the Virgin in stale blue leaning on her arm; God with the look of a madman about Him, fierce and on her side, flames shooting out of His mouth at the sight of what she sees. There she is, his angels bending round her brow, watching her dear, her me, basking in hell's rosy, licking flames. It's so warm here, pitchforked, spooned over, knifed to little ribbons of sweat, the new world here beneath that old world all gone bending over to give me a kiss; its face closer every breath I take. It's coming.

Then let her sleep, thinks Margaret; and leans back against the cold iron foot of the bed. I'll just keep my eyes on the sky, and when I see him coming I'll scream into her ear and she'll wake soon enough. Her worried little

prostestant, knowing little Presbyterian hands love into a sign of the cross over her forehead, heart, shoulders; her thumb and forefinger hold up the silver crucifix and point it toward Ellen. How would it seem if, instead of landing in the room as a bat, and with a flash of lights, a scrim of fog, changing into his human-shaped self, he just came up the stairs, a footstep at a time, all the way to our third floor, his boots rapping on the stair treds, his fingers jingling coins in his pockets, all the while thinking of re-doing the south bedroom at the castle, of planting something at the front gate, of the silly redhead piece he'd had last week--just casually on his way to the first meal of the day, happening to be in Ellen's throat? Embarrassing thought, she thought, with me here watching them. Obscene idea. Different if Ellen were screaming her lungs out at the sight of him, her eyes popping, struggling in his arms to get free; and me hopping around them waving the cross, shouting Begone! Begone! and Help Help! I can see it: him opening the door, quietly, casually; loosening his cape, shrugging his shoulders at me: well, she's here, so she might as well stay; stretching his arms, flexing his lips as he moves toward Ellen. And Ellen, throwing off her covers, unbuttoning her dress, lifting her arms to him and thinking, looking at me: well, she's here, so she might as well stay. And then they get on with it. Margaret shivers with loneliness. Evil

waggles its hips, bats its eyes at her, shimmies like an Egyptian dancer, its round belly contracting and rippling with promises. All around her, the crowd roars to touch it, fingers snatching at the giant dancer's draperies. Tear them off, let the mold of you re-mold me; sink me with the weight of you. The sideshow barker's bamboo cane whistles through the air above their heads, casting the magic patterns, pointing the way inside. Just a small price to pay; all the world the gain.

Margaret throws the blanket off. Well, me too. Arouse me, change the world; when dark shapes tear themselves off the face of the moon, make my arms open wide to them. Come on. Me too. She only shivers again, cold and lonely. But still she waits, her waiting automatic now, without feeling, without trembling. Nothing comes out of the sky but moonlight; but if it comes, there's always the prospect of fire before morning, always the prospect of rubbing cold hands before another's flames. Her watching might make it last even longer, and if she comes too close, perhaps they might both even lift an arm, draw her in, and let her lie in the warm ashes until she learns the construction of how and why.

Somehow the night passed. At one point, just before dawn, Margaret's mind marched around, up and down, in and out a single thought of death. Her guts rebelled with spears and clubs and beat her to go after Ellen's cupboard of food.

A drooling dog at the plate, a cat formed of bones and dirty fur, squawling until the first bite is on its tongue, an animal fighting off the dark by chewing and swallowing. She sat naked on the floor, ripped the top off the biscuit box, feeling her nails tear, a distant sensation. She stuffed two, three at a time in her mouth, barely chewed, forcing the hard chunks down her throat not quickly enough. How much better it would be, she feels, the sweet crumbs sticking to her skin, in each hand huge hunks of old Christmas fruitcake, to throw the food on the floor, bury my face in it, absorb with my tongue and lips the sweet and bitter. And in each mouthful, a piece of dust, a crumb of dirt from the floor to enliven the taste of the food. When it's over, collapse on the floor with bulging belly, groan, go to sleep like an old dog.

When it was over, she got up, strung with crumbs and her own saliva, her legs and buttocks smeared with Ellen's dirt. Dawn was rolling in the room, rosy, cool, shaking the place with birdsong. Ellen's lover had not come, and his last chance was gone with the first light. Margaret stood watching her for a moment, folding the blanket around her shoulders again, listening to the harsh, deep breathing. Slowly, exhaustion numbing every motion almost to a standstill, Margaret bent her arms and head and kissed Ellen's lips. The crumbs of cake came between their mouths, but

when Margaret raised her head, the tiny pieces of sweets had stuck to Ellen's lips, and they fluttered with her every breath.

"What are you doing in bed? It's nearly noon. You look like hell. The books on your desk are soaked. Why didn't you pull the window down?"

"I'm so sick."

"You should be. After that nasty feast you had on my floor last night. Don't cry, darling. I'll make you some coffee. Then what do you want? I've got to do something, I'm responsible. Come on, what?"

Margaret shook her head against her pillow, her tears flying in all directions. The rain slung bucketsful against the window and spread a wind that sounded like winter again.

"Wait, Ellen."

"I'm only going to pull the window down."

"What I want is the rest of the story."

"What story? God, your Russian paper is soaked; darling, that's forty pages to retype."

"Yesterday you said that was only the half of it." She turned her face into the pillow.

"I can't hear you. Sit up, what was it you said?"

Margaret made a laugh that sounded like a cry or a cough. Her voice strained to mask itself in frivolity. "Damn, you know, it's driving me crazy, but I'll never sleep again until you tell me what it was she played." Her hands dove beneath the covers, and she drove her nails into her bare buttocks to keep the tension of her need to know from her face.

"My lord, who what when where?" She picked up Margaret's hairbrush and began stroking her hair, smiling at the fresh face that looked at her from the mirror.

"Janet Hart, yesterday, playing the piano. What did she play? Morbid curiosity, isn't it?"

Ellen's voice, yesterday so intimate with, resounding with, the facts, this morning, now, was an embarrassed girlish giggle. "Gosh." She dropped the hairbrush and twirled before the mirror letting her hair flap out like a bird's wings. "Jesus, you make it sound like you're asking me the color of her underwear. Oh it was stupid. You know, romantic, painful." She giggled. "It was Für Elise."

Margaret relaxed, not into relief, but into nausea. When they had been children together, living in houses set side by side, she had made Ellen play her that over and over, until the sheet music was tattered, until she lay weeping with the joy of heartache on the sofa. She felt tricked; even music meant something else. Ellen clapped her hands.

"Look at you this morning, circles under your eyes, your hair like the kitchen mop! Don't tell me you sat up waiting for Dracula all night long!"

"Of course not, don't be stupid." Margaret turned on her side, away from Ellen. She began to ease the covers up over her head.

"What?"

"I said you look pretty damn glamorous again this morning." Yes, glamorous. Someone's poured magic from a bottle and it's barely begun to dry on top of the old beauty. Varnish on the oil painting. And going deeper than that: water into wine. Last night I was wrong, she was ugly and awkward because the new pieces hadn't yet fastened securely onto the old form. She's still just as beautiful, but not it's not transparent, crystal, water beauty. Now you can only see so far, and then the veil drops, the glamour dims your vision, you stumble on mystery.

"Now don't be childish, dear." Ellen lay down beside her and rubbed her arm; her voice was tender, unconcerned, tainted with the nuances of some foreign language no one had ever heard her speak before. "Come on," she coaxed, "you're acting like you've lost your best friend, and look at me, here I am after all." Margaret would not turn around. Ellen sighed into Margaret's matted hair, dull and gray-looking, elderly looking against the pillow case, the rain-soaked

light heavy on it. She spoke into her hair. "The other half of the story. We left the studio together. She said she was too drunk and glorified, glorified, she said, to give any more lessons. We went out the street door so no one from the college would catch her escaping. But then she went completely nutty and acted like she didn't care if the whole world was watching, climbed that high, narrow brick wall that separates that side of the campus from the town street and balanced herself up there, waving her arms, singing at the top of her lungs, like some eight year old just let out of school for the summer. She hadn't bothered to tuck her shirt back into her slacks, and there it was waving like a big blue flag for anyone to come along and salute. I was half-hysterical, laughing my head off at her and half scared to death she was going to break her neck. I expected her to start yelling No more teachers, no more books, no more teacher's dirty looks any minute. The darling!" Ellen's little shiver ran up Margaret's spine, struck her in the heart. "When I could stop laughing, of course, I begged and begged her to come down. Lord! You know how it is there: the big intersection, constant traffic, usually a cop around the traffic island, lots of mommies and carriages scooting in and out of the park beyond the drug store, the music faculty constantly on its way for coffee, back and forth. She didn't seem to care. I kept begging, she kept waving her

arms, tottering back and forth and singing. I yelled, Come down, please, come down! 'And what will you give me if I do?' she'd call back; and I'd say, Well..., and she'd say, 'You know what I must have if I come down, you know!' So I whispered, as much as I could not to be heard by all that gang down there, I knew what she meant, I whispered, A kiss! And that wasn't loud enough for her! 'A what? A what?' she yelled, and laughed, 'Speak a little louder, ma'm, I'm very hard of hearing!' So finally after we'd gone through this routine a couple of times and a couple of times she nearly really fell I decided Oh what the hell and shouted, A kiss, yes, a kiss! And then, by God, even that wasn't enough, she has to stop dead on the wall, standing there looking like nothing less than the great American Eagle perched on its windy American crag, and shout back: 'O, that's not nearly enough, not any more, you had your chance! The price has gone up. Now I'll have that kiss <u>and</u> your hair <u>and</u> your eyes and you must let me hold your hand on our way down the street! You're a witch,' she said, 'so conjure me up a brass band all decked out in blue and red so that we can ride on the shoulders of the bass drum and the trombone.' It's funny how no one really noticed or if they did all they thought was O just those curious crazy people over at the college. We were really safe. At last she came down, and didn't really touch me. She's only mad as a loon up to a

point. Listen Margaret: lust is cold; you wouldn't expect it to be, but it is, like the blade of a sharp knife, cold even after it's sliced through hot meat, and just as sharp. The finest point on anything is on lust. We had coffee and piles of food at the Greek's, and she kept shoving dimes in the juke box the whole time we sat there, like a kid, kept patting my hand in time to the music--pop tunes, and the way she goes on in class about the Bach family--and saying again and again, 'It's going to be all right, you know, everything's going to be all right,' though what's wrong and what's going to be right, I can't figure out."

Ellen turned her face out of Margaret's hair and lay looking up at the gray ceiling. "This room," she said. "It's like the bottom of a polluted pond today, stagnant, bunches of scum and dead leaves floating on top. No one ever comes here to fish or swim. How do you like being a sea monster down here with me?"

Margaret shuddered, drew her knees up, started to push off the blanket. "I think I'll get up now."

"Stop a minute. That's still only half the story."

"How can there be more?" Her voice was bitter, but it floated clear and high above the water. What dirty pond? This was her room, nothing more. Ellen's arm went out across her shoulders and drew her back down.

"At least pretend for a moment that you're still tired

or sick. Lie back. Just pretend I'm still like you, and your friend; and listen."

"Take your arm away."

"All right. There, it's gone. Now listen. Finally she had to go back. There were classes she couldn't miss, and I was ready to force her away if she didn't go by herself. My skin felt like a million hands were rubbing over it, my mind going blank and hectic by turns. I had to get away and find out what I really felt like. Whether I wanted to rush like a fiend straight back to her or run home and hide until I could forget it." She stopped talking, stuffed a hand against her mouth and giggled, a baby seeing a clown.

"And what's funny?"

"I can't help it. I just keep seeing her stamping up that blasted wall yelling, 'Scots whom Bruce has often led, Scots....., welcome to your bloody bed or to VICtoreeee!' "

"Christ, you make me ill."

"All right. So I walked, kept on walking, all the way downtown. I suppose I should properly have retired to the woods, dabbled my fingers and toes in the brooks, listened to the bird calls and sighed. Until I felt all pure again. Pure, pure. But that's how I felt when I left her, washed out clean down to the bone. What I wanted was the feel of dirt around me again, some wallowing around among

the public until the sweet old pores were all clogged with grease again and the average sensations were coming back. Nature's never done a thing for me, except to make me feel scared and lonely. There's something wrong with not being in sight of another person. No one to touch if you have to."

"Touch. Feel. Scared. Lonely. Pure. You sound like some damned pervert! I don't know you anymore. Get out of my bed! I don't want your stories, I want you away from me!" She had to scream to get the words out, as though she were giving birth to her first words. Her voice shot up and up, the one live fish in the pond, surfacing, hunting for his hook, if it really was a pond they were in. Her hand spun out before Ellen's feet reached the floor, and when it withdrew from the face, Ellen raised her own hand to caress the red imprint that Margaret had left there. The floor might as well be hot wax, Ellen thought. As I go away, I leave my footprints, my going-away footprints, imbedded here forever. Pointed away from her forever.

She turned the doorknob and said, "Thank you for staying up all night to protect me. Perhaps you were right, that there is a vampire to be afraid of, but you were just too late. It came before you knew it. That's what's wrong now." Anger grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. Red shadows draped the room and blinded her from any sight of the girl on the bed; her head trembled and the words

chattered out: "You bitch! Half-dead, sanctimonious little bitch! Did you expect me to stand before mirrors with you for the rest of my life, make up madrigals, pick wild flowers and pretty dresses, play with books and teachers, rise clear-eyed and shining witg you for the rest of my life! Damn you, I'm in life now, glorified life, to live and die like the rest of the world. Keep on being the beauty; I've become the beast, the active, feeling, suffering beast. And you'll never understand me, see how marvelous and beautiful the beast can be until you know enough to love me as I am. You won't ever know. You won't even open your eyes to hear me say this: the rest of the story, Being the tale of how Ellen, our wandering adventurer, pleasantly distracted in her mind and body from a sweet afternoon closeted with a lady of high degree, arrives in a low part of the town and quickly meets with a coarse young soldier lad who plies our heroine with drink and pretty blandishments, complimenting her on the turn of her ankle, on the sparkle in her eye and who duly hastens the befuddled maiden into a house of disreputable name and without further ado proceeds to fuck her. Fuck me. Screw me, do you hear me, Margaret? The end of the story. For what seemed like hours, or minutes, until I was shocked to discover that the humming I heard came from my own throat, and I got up again, washed down to my skeleton, glorified, purified, whatever we want to call it. You

won't lift your face. Suppose I never see it again. But you have heard me out. Darling, when you think you can see through my ugliness, come and find me again."

Tired. Dragged out. A night's sleep wasn't enough to put me back together. More exhausting telling it to her than actually doing it. And then, always conscious all night long through my sleep of her gleaming down at the foot of the bed saving me from the terrors with her little cross. Looking something like the vampire herself hovering there, but all gold and white instead of red-eyed and black. Why did I have to tell it all to her? Because I thought she'd say O darling and promptly weave a bridal wreath for my head, kiss the blushing bride? But impossible not to tell her. She would have noticed the change, started worrying about the mystery sooner or later. Two little baby girls both born on Christmas day twenty-one years ago. Two pretty mamas lying in twin hospital beds waiting for the embarrassed daddies to bring bunches of holly and flowers, celebrate the nativity. Little girl-christs. Blessed babies. All done right, breast-fed, gently weaned, sun and flowers in adjoining gardens.

Ellen stopped still in the quiet, damp hall. No one seemed to be home. The rain was making a twilight of the afternoon. It was as chilly as November, as a tunnel deep beneath the earth. At each end of the hall, the rain poured

and wasted itself against the high single windows. Wasting myself, she thought, pouring and dripping against the glass and the wall until I rest encased in a single drop on some bush leaf below; until the sun comes tomorrow and sucks me up. Her hands trembled. To make them stop she must remember what they could do. The sun and flowers in the garden. The two young mothers with faces like nothing but light bend down and take up two tiny hands. The hands, my hand, close on the gift of small yellow flowers, dandelions, and my hand crushes the flower to sap, to its essence, until the power and system of its life runs into my own. That first flower drew the lines on my palms, making love and fate and death swoop and lean heavily into my flesh. What does the dark baby remember of the fair baby next to it in the grass? That the golden child cuddled her flower for an instant and tossed it away unharmed back to her mother's lap. Ellen heard the rain flow faster. A wind whirled and scattered her. She whiled away her trip to the ground with the song of the mothers on the grass in the spring.

"I live for this baby!"

"They are beautiful. We are lucky. Lean back here on the grass with me; it's softer and younger and greener than ever this year. Chunks of sky seem to be falling through the pines. Shall we run and tell the men the sky is falling in?"

"What will they be when they're grown up? I see them in the church now and we've made their wedding gowns ourselves, a double wedding in the summer, strong young men. I can smell the flowers, rich smells of flowers and satin, the mahogany pews, our white gloves. I can just smell the flowers! Look, she's patting me on the face. Sometimes I think they stare right through each other's eyes and know without a word between them what's happening in the other mind."

"You smell the dandelion Ellen just crushed in her hand. Ellen's mine, remember; that screamer! At night I know you hear her crying and fighting sleep when Margaret's been dead to the world for hours. Oh, don't plan. I hate to plan. They're only two little baby girls."

"Dead to the world, is she? Get up and we'll take them in. I feel a chill. No, she's only gentle with the world. Did you see how she tossed the flower back to me?"

The two babies, drunk on their first spring, barely sitting up, patted and punched at each other's faces; their fingers and thumbs made gouging motions at each other's eyes. Just before twenty lacquered nails clamped against their chests, just before the four slim rose-and-glycerined hands shot them up through the air (babies experience nothing if not levitation), one, Margaret, lost her strength and fell forward. Finding it charming, Ellen gave up her strength

a second later and one collapsed on the other's body. Ellen clasped Margaret in her arms.

An inter-com box, that hung from the wall in the center of the hall like a big meshed ear, chuckled, became a sore throat, and spoke: "Ellen Fairbanks. Telephone."

The trip down the three flights of stairs made her long hair swarm through the damp, made her body send out questions as it moved: If it is Janet Hart, what will you do? Say I can't get enough of it, say my mind has given its career to my flesh. I am hungry, what are you going to do about it? At the second landing, the mirror flashed back the moving paleness of her face, the deep pits of dark eyes, the empty mouth opening on emptiness. I want to crouch in the corner and be Margaret, pry open boxes and tins and grovel in food until it hangs from my chin, then to sleep and forget how easily, how promiscuously I give myself away. Are you tired? Yes, her body answered.

She panted hello into the telephone.

"Sweetheart, it's Mama."

"Mama? Why are you calling? Won't I see you tonight?"

"That's the awful news. I won't be there at the play tonight."

And what does that matter, thought Ellen, in the tiny, steaming telephone closet. She leaned on the table and sweated against the receiver. Her mother, she realized as

though someone were whispering the information into her ear, was feebleminded, calling long-distance a strange girl, an imaginary daughter. It's best to humor such women, fake a childish love for them until the men can come in their limousine and take her off to a padded room that is safe for such fantasies.

"I'm only in the chorus. It's Margaret who's Cassandra. From the audience, you'd hardly be able to find me anyway."

The telephone crackled. Faint, ringing bleeps announced the distance between them. Ellen sat down on the floor. The poor woman, dialing a number at random and then pretending to speak to her daughter.

"But speak a little of your piece to me anyway. You don't know how terrible I feel... Have I ever missed a single piano recital (yes, thought her imaginary daughter), a single school play? No. Say a little of it over the phone."

The telephone closet was becoming a steam bath. Ellen leaned over and propped open the door, but there were girls in gym suits running by with basketballs, each face peering in at her as it bounced by. She peered straight back at them, counting the knobby, scarred knees; wondering what they wondered of her. The front door banged against the wall for the last time, the last white tennis shoe kicked the heel ahead of it and shot out into the drizzle. The

door stayed still for a moment. Then it opened again and Janet Hart came in and leaned against it and looked at her.

Ellen swallowed and closed her eyes. The telephone receiver slipped with sweat against her ear.

"Go ahead. Please, sweetheart, say something of it for Mama. I'll pretend to be there this evening and remember how you said it." Ellen kept her eyes closed, made scissors of two fingers and imagined chopping her hair off with them just below the ears.

"Um... Mother. I..."

"My big, grown girl! Suddenly you call me Mother! I can't imagine not being Mama anymore! Let's hear you say it."

Ellen grasped her hair and pulled it until it could not touch her face. She began reciting. Her voice at first sounded scarred, but then she and Janet Hart and her mother heard it heal, become deep and ringing.

" 'We heard your voice, Hecabe; why did you call?
What did you say? As we sat there indoors
Thinking of slavery with bitter tears,
Your cry of agony came to us, and we all
Shuddered with nameless fears'."

"How sad and unpleasant. Who is Hecabe?" Ellen's mother seemed faintly, distantly, to be crying. Ellen, with her eyes closed, was amazed by the image before her: Euripides stunning a huge audience of mothers to tears.

"She's Margaret's, she's Cassandra's mother." There was a pause over the line. Then deep, hulking sobs began to crawl through Ellen's ear.

"What is it? What is it, Mother? Stop crying, what's wrong with you?" God, she thought, what's wrong with the woman taking tragedy so seriously? She saw her mother blooming through sunny, endless days with lipstick and hair dye over the irises and azaleas, over the polishing cloth and the silver, over the daughter's pinafores. Always over the piano. Hecabe and a ruined race could not tear through her mother's wall, wring sobs from her with distasteful, death-tainted proclamations. She opened her eyes to decrease the noise inside her head. Margaret with her hair gleaming again from the brush, dressed in fresh, pale cotton, was standing before Janet Hart, blocking Ellen's view of the waiting woman. Margaret was giving something small and white to Janet Hart, and Janet Hart was bending over it, very still and serious.

"It's... it's that Daddy's dead." Ellen closed her eyes again, but the huge noise had stopped. Only the drizzle of her mother's nose, gasps of breath before the words, reached her. Daddy, a word of two soft syllables, Daddy, something she had never seen her mother have alive or dead. She meant, of course, a husband. Giant, new sobs came over the wire. Between them, faint bleepings came, signals from

a distant planet.

"What do you mean?" Margaret still hid Janet Hart. Janet Hart still stared seriously at the small white thing in her hand. Her mother's voice rose, with each statement, into a question mark, as though she were asking verification of the facts from the make-believe daughter, the girl crouched in a pool of sweat in a tiny box miles and miles away from the scene of the tragedy.

"He was, you know, out in the mail cart this morning? He said, last thing after breakfast, you know, we'll have to go get in the new-fangled putt-putt, old feet aren't good enough anymore to carry the letters around? And I said, Roger, why those little motorized carts are good for you? No more lugging that big leather bag from door to door through all the cold and heat and someday dropping dead of a heart attack on some stranger's doorstep? I said? I said, you just stay put in that little putt-putt with the nice zip-up plastic to keep you from the cold in winter and sun in summer, and then he said, Well, anything you say May-Ellen; it's a living, though I look a pure fool fooling around on three wheels like that. But fool or no, I said, I've still got a husband?" The voice broke again. Her husband, that's what she meant. Yes, it had been Hecabe for whom her mother first wept. After all, the azaleas and irises, the Arthur Godfrey show that woke her up in the morning, the everlasting serials

that lulled her afternoons and, she had once said, gave her food for thought (Oh, how she had longed to be one with Mary Noble, Backstage Wife); and, always, the piano--after all, these things had made an easy wall for Hecabe and the Greeks to leap. Perhaps they didn't have to leap; her mother could easily have left the gate unlocked. Now the Trojan women had her in their arms, wailing with her, teaching her tragedy. This evening, thought Ellen; I have to get rid of her before this evening because I have to be in the Chorus and see Margaret be Cassandra. For an instant, grief, like a very small pebble, appeared on her tongue. It was tasteless and hard and could do injury to the guts, but it was simple to swallow. She easily swallowed it, and it did not choke her.

"What happened?" Somewhere between Margaret and Janet Hart, the small white thing had vanished. From the telephone closet, Ellen could see nothing of them but the tops of their heads, quite close together above the knubby green back of the couch in the dormitory parlor. And the tops of their heads appeared to be agreeing about something important: first the crazy grizzly gray of Janet Hart's hair would nod slowly up and down; then it would be still while Margaret's golden crown would swoop a few times in the same directions, quite as slowly. Ice-cold annoyance jabbed at Ellen through the damp heat. Out there, the two of them

were saying drastic things about her, ruining everything, while here she sat closeted with death, with a woman going wild because the sweet wall that had protected her life had suddenly lost a single brick; and through the gap in the fortress, nasty things were slithering in, asking to be kissed, asking her mother to embrace them and call them her own. A thought ocurred to Ellen; a dim amazement followed it: only yesterday, as everyday before it, she had loved this woman without question, and very much so. From yesterday, especially in this moment, all she wished to tell was involved in a long scream: Let me out of here!

"Please. Stop crying. Tell me what happened," she said. At least Margaret and Janet Hart were no longer discussing her. Their heads were motionless and faced forward. They could only be staring out the long french windows at the other end of the parlor; and there could be nothing there to see but the drenched grass of the quadrangle, and more rain hurtling to it.

"Around about an hour ago? The post office called me and said, you know? They said that some big white cadillac with that sixteen year old McGehee boy who just yesterday got his license, just slung itself around the corner and mowed him down in his little putt-putt like as not without even seeing he was there. O, dear God, Roger!" The voice from the distant telephone rose into a wail that climbed the

scale until a peak was reached that the throat could not support. Then it broke, and the sobbing recommenced. Ellen took the phone from her ear and stared at it. She had never heard such a thing. From such a sound, she seemed to expect a visible sign; and there was none to be seen.

The words continued. "They said from the post office? They said, Mrs. Fairbanks, Roger just couldn't have felt a thing, it was over just too quick. And I said to them, where was it, where was it? And they said, don't worry about a thing, they'd take care of everything, but Roger was being fixed up just as nice as he could be over at the funeral home. And, oh Ellen, how I screamed at them, you know, they thought I meant that Roger was it when I said Where was it? He is an It! They think Daddy is an it! I couldn't stand it, them talking to me like that. But then they said, it was Greenway Avenue over there in the gold coast section where sixteen year old boys can drive around in big white cadillacs!"

For the first time, Ellen choked on grief, and inside her stomach, grief swelled to fury and exploded. It was herself she saw spread across some terraced lawn in the red, white and blue tangle of government-owned metal. And the rich, thick wheels of the little bastard's car were crushing her chest into the earth; and the little bastard (she knew him: motherless and spoiled, a straight-D student, with

pimples on his face and a trip to Europe behind him) leaning over her, his tongue hanging out, amazed at the beauty of her blood against the green grass, his stupid eyes popping at her armless torso.

"O, say something! Say something, Ellen. It was your father!"

"I'll come home right now."

Instantly, the woman at the other end of the wire became calm and strong. Her voice was deep and steady; it nearly hummed. "No," she said. "I won't have it like this for you. I want you in the play tonight. I want you at graduation tomorrow."

Death had shocked all idea of convention out of her mother; it was this that shocked Ellen, not death. "But..." she began.

"No. You heard me," the calm voice continued. "I've never missed one of your things. I don't intend to have you start missing your own things now. Roger would die all over again if he knew that."

"When is the funeral?" She began to pull herself up from the floor. In a minute, her mother would hang up and she could run to the window at the end of the hall, fling it open, and be cooled. The sweat was like glue between her bare thighs.

"Day after tomorrow. You can come then. But you

mustn't miss a single thing you're due there. Don't come until it's all over. Is the white dress all right?"

"Yes."

"And Margaret's? They're almost the same. We went to Raleigh for them I'm glad to say."

White dresses and Margaret and death at the door. Yes, the woman was mad, but her madness was incredibly agile and useful. Society could not lock her up, could not stand to be without her. They would have to let her run loose and keep her insanity. Who else in the world could absorb death with a wail and care enough in the next breath about a girl she no longer owned to plan white dresses for her?

"Mother, you're not alone are you?" There was always the chance that she'd run berserk. And there were always bread knives, even guns, available somewhere. An insane woman, Ellen realized, could be glorious. It was only when she sank back to mere feeblemindedness that she was a drab handicap. She could be glorious and raving, like Janet Hart atop the wall, but with tears and lamentations. The play, she thought, is at home. She wished to be there.

"No. Everyone's here." In the background, Ellen then could hear it, the murmur of women's voices saying, seemed to be saying, over and over, May-Ellen, May-Ellen, May-Ellen. May-Ellen this and that. Occasionally, Roger. There was the chorus. It was up to her to lead it. She

could even take Margaret; she would need Cassandra. To hell with the Greek play. The rain would not stop anyway.

"Are you sure?"

"Goodbye, Ellen. Come after graduation. Poor darling, no one there for you; but Margaret's Mama and Daddy will be for you, too. They'll take you as their own and bring you home to me after. Goodbye."

As she had promised herself she would, she ran down the hall that led away from the parlor to the little window at its end. She trotted nearer to it and it grew brighter as she came closer. The sunlight, freshly washed, was dazzling even through the grimy window. She threw the window open and threw her head and arms into the sun. Her hair hung down along her arms as she leaned out. The sunlight, instead of heating, cooled and dried her and surges of green, spring-smelling breeze purified the sweat from her skin. The basketball players were returning, wandering over the sodden grass yawning and smiling over their last game, their brief, pale-blue skirts flapping up and out together like a clump of oddly-grown garden flowers. The view of blue girls moving across the expanse of green, their throats sending her noises like the sounds of sleepy birds, gave Ellen an unquestionable name to the vague feelings that were roaring out of her and going transparent and lost into the sun. The name was pleasure, and her feelings became a thick and solid

sight before her. It was as though the pale blue girls had stopped their wandering and chattering and were spelling out the word with the bodies. Ellen lifted her hand and waved at them. They stopped, surprised; it could be royalty showing a friendly, equal glance to chimney sweeps: they were junior physical education majors, their highest principles arrested in Fair Play and Mens Sana in Corpore Sano, and she was Ellen. They were more conscious of the difference between themselves and Ellen than Ellen was. That was why they were surprised. Their surprise would have turned to shock if they had known the real reason for her wave, their real usefulness to Ellen, the naming of her feelings. The girls looked at each other for a moment and seemed to make up their minds: they sent many little waves back to her and some even blew her a kiss. After all, they would be without her next year.

Her feelings had gathered and waved back to her, had thrown her kisses. Ellen closed her eyes against the sun and smiled. Her feelings had confirmed themselves; they existed; they approved of Ellen as their habitation. The pleasure was being moved and tossed and brought to pleasure by another's body; the pleasure was the thought of her father's mangled and dead body against a slab in some subterranean room expecting only the grave, while her own leaned and throbbed in the sun and expected more pleasure

from countless other living bodies that were waiting for her. The pale blue girls disappeared around a corner of bushes.

Silently she went into the parlor and stopped behind the two heads that had remained exactly as she had left them, motionless at her command above the back of the couch. She stuck the fingers of her left hand through Janet Hart's hair, grasped it and gently pulled; she lightly rested the fingertips of her right hand on the crown of Margaret's head. Both of them sprang up from beneath her fingers and faced her over the couch. Ellen would not look at Janet Hart; she said, instead, to Margaret: " 'You pass off with a pleasant laugh things that should wring your inmost soul; --not that you will have much to show for all your prophesying'."

Margaret stared blankly at her for a moment. For the first time, Ellen noticed that she had a fresh piece of pink ribbon in her hair. It matched the dress she wore perfectly.

"Go to hell," said Margaret. She turned her back on them and left them, moving for the french doors at the far end of the parlor as though to the sound of some polonaise that rattled only through her head. The french doors swung back at her touch and hung gaping open behind her; her feet met the brick porch without a stumble, although her eyes were watching the sky. But it was not until she was nearly clear across the soaked quadrangle that she felt she had

shaken off the two stares that were clinging to her back.

As soon as there was no Margaret left for them to look at, Janet Hart went to a chair and sat. She hung her head, her heavy, wrinkled eyelids dropped. She was a pathetic zoological display: a wild eagle, captured, tamed, taught to mimic shyness. Ellen sat in the chair nearest her, a chair not very near her. With the sun pouring rivers of light and shadows across their feet on the carpet, Ellen was becoming conscious of time again.

"Soon," she said, "I will have to get ready for the Greek play."

Janet Hart raised her eyes; the eagle looked out from behind the old, bent bars of his cage. "I hope it doesn't embarrass you for me to be here." Her left hand was shaking, and so she clasped it into her right. "A student of mine wrote the music for the play. I'll be there. A flute, a drum, a cymbal. That's all, but it's effective. But you must know that, from rehearsal."

"Yes." Ellen could feel nothing, but she was called upon to feel embarrassment. Her father's cheek and hand pressed against her own. The embalming fluid from his body flowed across her and made her flesh senseless. She rubbed her wrist fiercely against the rough tapestry covering of her chair; she urged embarrassment up and got some weak response: possibly, someone could pass the door and wonder.

Janet Hart closed her eyes. She could not use an Ellen coated with complications of age and grief; when she was sober, as now, she had her own waxen armor about her, and between it and her skin, no feeling crawled but failure. Her childhood and youth, her father's maturity and money had been spent preparing Janet Hart for the concert stage. It took five fiascos (three in San Francisco and two in New York) for them both to learn that she could play brilliantly only when drunk and then how drunken, but brilliant, the piano sounded! After the fifth time, her father, too, had got drunk and then shot himself. And Janet Hart had found the little second-rate southern college to take her in and tend her while she played brilliantly, when drunk, mourned occasionally, and watched the girls collect each fall in her classes. Each year they seemed less talented, knew less music than the last. But each year they seemed to grow prettier.

She crossed her knees to make a lap to hide her shaking hand in. Two cigarette burns had made holes through the thick black and white tweed of her skirt; and it seemed to Ellen that the holes were eyes and that Janet Hart's knee was peering out at her. Then Janet Hart got up and the eyes disappeared.

"You have some time," she said. "If you're going to talk to me at all, let's spend it walking."

They, too, went through the french doors, past the fragrance that Margaret had left there. Almost, Ellen thought, I can almost feel her dress here, very pink and fresh, between my fingers.

In the sun, they walked to the woods, the air becoming as they approached the thick green and shadow, as sweet as flowers in their mouths. Their arms brushed together as they walked, their feet squeaked and went raw against the wet leather of their shoes.

The woods, despite their brambles, their mud below, are a country of silken leisure. Occasionally the wind hisses, inhaling the damp, and then the leaves on some of the trees turn up and show their moonlit bellies. Occasionally, as they hold hands and walk down a narrow path beneath the trees, both Ellen and Janet Hart have their eyes closed at the same time, though neither of them is aware that the other is also blind. When this happens, beneath the four eyelids, spectacles of color and light occur: orange, representing the sun, flashes in jagged, oval streaks; red, representing some intense bare patch of light, soaks the eyeballs for a split second and then is transformed into purple. When green happens, it is because they have passed out of all light and sun and are walking in deep shadow; trees meet overhead. Bird calls and leaf rustles do not disturb their blind pacing, deeper, downhill steeply towards

the center of the little wood. Only when one of them stumbles and pulls downward with her hand, do they both open their eyes. Oddly, it is the younger woman, it is Ellen, who does all the stumbling. Janet Hart knows how to walk through the dark, or through a den of lions or theives, and come up alive. She has practiced it many times with all her senses numb and with her feet and brain pickled in bourbon.

They reach the center of the wood, which is like the bottom of a deep green and golden hole. The smells are of nothing but earth and water; the trees here shut out all the sky. They draw apart with their eyes open, both staring down at the deep little stream that makes its first and last appearance here at the center of the wood, rolls over brown and moss rocks, beneath a little wooden footbridge, and disappears down a concrete tunnel to feed a secret, thirsty race at the center of the earth. The water is knee-deep; it is flanked by banks of mud, almost obscene in their slipperiness. Janet Hart sits, and pulls Ellen down next to her on a flat rock above the water.

Janet Hart said, "What do you want most, Ellen?"

Ellen answered, "All my life I have wanted only one thing most; and that thing for a very short time. Then, I have wanted another thing most. But I have always remained faithful to my wants. They make a long procession, these wants, behind me. I could reach out now and touch any one

of them, say, one that is ten years old, and tell it, I still want you. When I was a year old, I noticed, one summer night, the moon through my window; and they had to walk me up and down all that night, everybody went without sleep, because I wanted the moon more than anything. I remember, it was enormous and orange. I have never seen it that way since. They were desperate, but, they thought, she will forget it because the moon will change to a tiny silver sliver soon and won't seem so gorgeous. And even then, they hung dark curtains at my window to make sure I never noticed it again. But still, they say, I cried for weeks, even though they took me outside in the dark to show me that the big orange thing had gone away, because I knew the moon was still there behind my curtains, behind the sky, and the hopeless little paper smile they had pasted there to distract me was only a grownup trick, not my moon.

"Then," she continued, (many leaves rattled above them. They looked, but it was only two squirrels coming nearer. When the squirrels turned their heads away, Janet Hart and Ellen could see that, below their dark film, the squirrels' eyes were as deep and thickly red as rubies, and seemed dangerous) "when I was six, I wanted more than anything else a ghost. I had learned to read out of story books about ghosts and goblins and witches. Witches did not interest me, they seemed too close to being human. It was

a ghost I wanted. I put on a sheet many times, and I would wait in the shrubbery outside Margaret's window. I would go Hooo-Hooo, and Margaret would finally put down her coloring book and crayons inside and look out. Then I would scream at her and say, I've come to eat you up alive and spit out your bones! Margaret went Eek! a few times, but then she would giggle and finally she wouldn't come to the window anymore or else she would come and say, Please take off the silly-billy-goat sheet and come inside and color with me. But I still wanted a ghost. My mother said, Lord no! Don't you know that a person has to be dead to be a ghost? Who do you want dead, now? I decided to kill something, and then I would have its ghost to carry around with me always. It was really a child-ghost I wanted, but children aren't easily killed, and I didn't know how, really. I thought of killing Margaret, how lovely it would be to have her pale and transparent, invisible to all but me, and attached to my fingers for the rest of my life. Ghosts, I knew, could fly, could pass through walls. I saw dead Margaret teaching me to fly, passing me through thick walls of bedrooms, perhaps my parents' bedroom so that I could watch them in bed together at night. One whole summer, I dreamed of nothing but soaring in Margaret's hands through a dark summer sky, all above the town.

"When I was twelve, it was a boy I wanted. He was

seventeen, and his head was covered with thick bunches of black hair that hung constantly in his eyes. He was a newcomer in the town and spoke with what I assumed to be a Yankee accent. I first saw him--the only time I saw him--in the high school senior class play. My mother took me to it because my cousin was in it, and there he was playing Oberon in Midsummer Night's Dream. He wore purple tights, gold slippers with turned-up toes and a blue satin shirt that looked like a Russian blouse. Well, they had to make do, you know. It was only a high school, and a poor one. He enchanted me. He came on stage; instantly, I imagined his arms around me, his mouth whispering sophisticated, theatrical prattle in my ears. I did not dream of being Titania; I dreamed of me handing him his grease-paint for the rest of my life. I was sure he was going to be an actor. After the play, my mother and I went backstage to see the cousin, she said. All those fairy costumes! I remember they were beautiful, but they all looked exactly like "Swan Lake." Fairies in ballet slippers. There he was, being just what I thought he would be, standing still in one spot while the rest of the cast came and threw their arms around him. Between hugs, he would snap his fingers a lot and say Ricky-Ticky-Tavey, kiddo and show off lots of saturnine little grins.

As I said, my first and last sight of him, but he did

me one great service: he formed the center of my first erotic fantasies and I discovered how absorbing and delicious life could be. You seem restless; my catalogue will end. But let me tell you: if the chance of killing someone came along--(and I was guaranteed absolute safety in the act by the murderee--I see it happening in a narrow room with a ceiling and walls of shining stainless steel, on a floor carpeted in thick red and green wool, my knife soaring, its shadow glinting against the steel wall; my victim lying quite still, smiling up at me, offering me the dear soul that would become my ghost and make a warm, all-enclosing halo around my body for the rest of my life--the ghost and I, self-sufficient. Even after my death, I would not be alone. I imagine the relatives weeping over the victim's "suicide" and then leaving me to it. How I would grab that chance! I still need that ghost.)

"And if the ricky-ticky-tavey boy suddenly materialized beneath that tree across the water, don't think I wouldn't wade across and eat him alive in a moment. You don't know how I ache with infant frustration every time the moon turns big and orange. I often have the sensation that someone at some time I can't remember promised me all my heart's desires and then reneged on the promises. It's what makes me rather half-angry all the time beneath this pretty face of mine!" Ellen smiled coyly and glanced beneath her

lashes over at Janet Sanctissima.

But Janet Sanctissima did not feel the flirting. Her bony knees were drawn up and pressed against her forehead. Her strong arms and hands met around her legs and cufflinked them to her body. Her eyes were closed--a fifty-two year old eagle embryo dressed in tweed. Ellen's face hardened, and she looked back into the trees. She remembered that it was often said musicians, like dancers and like most actors, were mostly illiterates. Not only, she saw, could they not read; neither could they grasp the sense of a story when it was told to them.

Time was passing. The afternoon grew rich and fat with gold in its old age, and the bent enclosure of woods around them were becoming the brass pot in which Black Jumbo carried home the Tiger-butter. Black Mumbo should polish the pot: it was much too green and moldy. Now the tiger-butter would poison the entire family, and Little Black Sambo would be buried in his fine new clothes. I will inherit, thought Ellen, the purple umbrella....

"Excuse me for a moment. Please don't go away." Janet Sanctissima stood before Ellen, her knees wobbling a bit before Ellen's face from the sudden strain of standing. Scampering ocurred in the bushes behind them--her sudden action had disturbed something four-legged.

When she had gone, shuffling loudly in the tracks of

the squirrel, Ellen made an equally large physical effort and cast all thought out of her mind. Concentrating on infinity (which she could imagine as a comfortless expanse of pain) she quickly undressed, feeling the perspiration dry in patches as each stitch came off. When she was naked, she sat at the top of the slippery bank of mud, and pushed off. In the deep stream up to her neck, she gasped from the cold and the pointed rocks that fought back against her flesh. It was barely deep enough to float, which she did, waving her hands slightly against the water to maintain her balance and staring straight up into the thick green miles overhead. It was like floating in a giant, canopied bed. She wished it were deep enough to swim, to follow the stream for the many many miles it would take to taste salt in her mouth. She rocked in the water, and her hair began to fan out around her.

"What in the name of God." The croak from high above on the bank was the voice of Janet Sanctissima. Some streaks of sun penetrated the tree tops, and Ellen felt one warm hand against her forehead and another against her belly. Another, a third, streak of sunlight shone through the brown quart bottle in Janet Sanctissima's hand. The bottle's radiance diverted Ellen's gaze from the amazed, open-mouthed eagle face above it.

"Ellen."

"Yes, Most-Holy."

"Is that what they call me?"

"Of course. It was inevitable."

"Please come out of the water. Someone else could come. If you love me, come out of the water."

Ellen took a breath and turned over, face down, and kept on floating. She imagined how laughable her bare buttocks were jutting white out of the brown-colored water. But she was not deaf to Janet Sanctissima.

"My name of course is not really Sanctissima," came the voice through the water. "Oh, for god's sake, come out of the water! It was a name someone dreamed up for my mother when she was on her way to becoming a singer. She was the sweetest singer ever born. I never heard a nursery tune in all my life as a child. I was the only child ever born to lie in its crib at sunset and every night for six years be sung to sleep by 'Voi che sepete'. Aurora Sanctissima, can you believe it? A most full-bosomed, most golden-haired little lady who was taken from us into the choirs of the angels one snowy untimely December evening when she slipped in a snowbank and fell in front of a passing Rolls moving not too rapidly down Fifth Avenue in the city of New York. She had gone out for nothing other than a fresh bottle of iodine because she had heard from someone that Mary Garden took ten drops of iodine in warm milk before retiring every

night of her life. One could say that her devotion to Art killed her. Although Papa, the family Svengali--our all-round impressario, accompanist, teacher, press-agent and occasional provider--insisted it was the Rolls. Papa was very proud of that Rolls. It was hard to make much of a story out of a wife who never got farther than five-dollar solos for Episcopalian and Jewish feast-days, but who could not be impressed by the idea of our close relative beneath the wheels of that gleaming, chauffered Rolls? Well. Luckily I was already asleep that night and had got my dose of song in shead of time. If only you would come out of the water! I can see you sneaking breaths in,you know! A most full-bosomed, a most golden-haired lady! Some lonely only ladies like myself put themselves to sleep at night drinking or masturbating or listening to first-hand accounts of flying-saucer reports on the radio. But not I--no, I curl up and hear 'Voi che sepete' coming from the foot of the bed."

For a long moment there was silence, but before Ellen could sneak another breath in, a long heavy foot clamped down on the top of her head and forced her open mouth and face into the rocky mud of the stream's floor. There was a scream in Ellen's head that could not get out through the mud in her mouth, but her body thrashed in the water like a twirling, half-dead fish's. The Sanctissima hands, hands

of steel, were beneath her armpits as soon as the foot was lifted; and Ellen's body was jerked from water into oxygen in a backward arch. The Sanctissima back scarcely had to bend to take the weight of her. Janet Sanctissima's mouth spat words against Ellen's closed eyelids. Ellen spat mud and stones into the shoulder of the Sanctissima white shirt, put her arms around the neck and hung there. Her face still looked into the tree tops, that were beginning to whirl into a green broth. Janet Sanctissima spoke into Ellen's eyelids, and they stood quite still, knee-high in the water.

"Now you will undergo my story and my love. Treat it like a trial of fire, the rack, the inquisition if you must; but you will swallow the torture and it will make you grow. Wiggling naked in the water before my eyes! It wasn't even seductive behavior--you were seducing yourself; I was merely the mirror you acted before."

Janet Sanctissima took Ellen's wrist and dragged her, like a child stupid with sleep and tantrums, up some stones that made steps in the slippery embankment of the stream. Ellen gathered the last of the mud in her mouth and spat it against the back of the white shirt.

"How dare you <u>handle</u> me!" she screamed behind the spurt of mud, and Janet Sanctissima simply gripped the wrist and pulled harder. At the top of the embankment, the Sanctissima hand let go,and Ellen fell backwards against wet

spring earth that seemed to bounce back against her body. The circumference of the little wood was tightening and drawing in; before very long, its edges would touch the tips of her outstretched fingers, and the blue and lighted world beyond would creep up to, then into, this dark green one. Janet Sanctissima presented her back to Ellen and tilted her own face upwards to the green roof. The brown quart bottle in her hand again caught a ray of sun. Some birds sang above her; and out of the emptying bottle the eagle was released, and its sharp mouth fell upon Ellen's.

The circumference of the wood was shrinking, its dark thick colors crushing in upon each other, at first slowly, then ever faster. The wood had a heartbeat that skipped, then thudded. Finally there was nothing to it but a single tree, then a single branch, then a single leaf, pale green in color, and flooded with the golden light of the outside world that had entered and swallowed whole the rich food of the thick little wood. The heartbeat continued to thud within the single pale green leaf. It was something the golden world could not absorb.

"Now where did I put the bottle?" Janet Sanctissima swept the leaves of bushes with her hands until they found the bottle. Things were growing dim. It seemed that much time had passed. When they had passed the last trees of the wood and reentered the grassed and brick paved quadrangle,

it would be a twilit, suppertime world there. Janet Sanctissima leaned against the stones on which they had formerly sat and stretched her legs and drank again. She held the bottle out before her and carressed its shape and turned it in her hands, but the sunlight was not strong enough anymore to reach down and pierce it.

"There's been a Janet Sanctissima bottle hidden in this wood as long as there's been a Janet Sanctissima coming here." Ellen opened her eyes and shifted her head against the Sanctissima shoulder uneasily. It seemed there was a tradition of a bottle in the woods and a Sanctissima in the woods to drink it. A faint idea began to enter Ellen's mind, a faint idea that she might be a cog in the wheel of the Sanctissima history, that her performance in the water was not a unique sight before the Sanctissima gaze. The faint idea grew strong and stood up straight before her: that soft, bouncing earth around her was not warmed by the spring and by her body's imprint alone. Watching it now, she saw it stirred by the hot forms of teacher and students, many students bent on escaping music. Ellen closed her eyes again and leaned back, attempting to recapture her ease and the dream she had been having. The dream had constructed a house that could have been Janet Sanctissima's home and had built a place inside it that was unquestionably Ellen's. The dream was nothing if not domestic and homely--the

Sanctissima and Ellen in twin rocking chairs before a handsome fire, Ellen pulling the batik curtains at evening, the Sanctissima digging around the budding crocuses and Ellen baking an omelet--many clear, insistent pictures such as these had formed the dream, and all were without a trace of sexual drama, without a trace of the high-and-mighty lovers' quarrels and tension and exstacies that Ellen kept peering through the boring pictures of the dream to find. It was all very surprising and annoying until she opened her eyes for the second time (the Sanctissima had moved her shoulder and had allowed Ellen's head to crack back against the rock) and recognized that the pictures and the people of the dream were of her parents and their life together. Still, she thought, through the pain in her head (and the afternoon began to blink its eyes and draw some shadows from its mouth), how lucky she was to have life settled so early so easily--the long fat years ahead with music and with long, narrow, musical Janet Sanctissima. It was obvious to Ellen that all this notion of happiness required to set it rolling, firm, circular and gleaming, off into the future was her acceptance of herself as a non-unique person, a not even very extraordinary person, possibly (and even her stomach resisted her) something gray and drab named ordinary. Happiness, she saw, hinged on discarding the perfect personality that had strolled down through the trees to the water and joining,

faceless and nameless, in the common denominator of the past love that had been made on the patch of warm earth that overhung the stream. Possibly (and she felt that it must), happiness could come only after even more extreme loss to her own dear person: she saw a flood of lovers sweeping toward her from the Beginning and as the wave of them rose above her head, they became in close view a mass of kissing, copulating protoplasm achieving their happiness. Sinking behind them were the hard dark edges of their individual selves. Happiness, she saw, was an eternity stretched out of the hot vacant instant of the climax, when it was not her own name she called out, but another's.

"Oh dear me," whispered Ellen to herself as Janet Sanctissima swallowed the last drop. She had a clear vision of herself: she was glazed with butter and crowned with maraschino cherries, entirely delectable in this sweet film of exstacy to any beholder and especially, she thought, to Janet Sanctissima. The vulnerable washed-clean purity of yesterday's sex was coated in this new sticky, happy, decorated crust. It was something new from sex, something entirely different; it could protect her, she thought, from any imaginable pain. The sharpest knife would snap plunged against the thick bright armour that was hardening against her breast. How she hated it! The smell of whiskey was nauseating to her empty stomach.

"What utter crap." Janet Sanctissima walked in a direct steady line into the bushes; she returned without the bottle. Ellen stood up to meet her, smoothing the wrinkled, spotted yellow of her dress into something that could hopefully be made public.

"What did you say to me?" Ellen answered her, lifting her arms up to greet her. It was the only possible way, she thought, at least for the moment. Later, if she looked very hard for it, she could surely find something that would make her feel and suffer joyfully again. For now, to shield the Sanctissima feelings, she would have to tolerate happiness.

Janet Sanctissima avoided the outstretched arms and lighted a cigarette. The match sizzled an instant against the stream and then was carried from them. She knew from experience that she was almost as drunk as she could possibly be and longed to be back at home and playing the piano. But there was still something--yes, it was Ellen--to get over with before she could do that. Her scruples demanded it. She wondered at herself. It should be very cheering to bask in that blazing happiness in front of her, that she herself had caused. It made her edgy. This would take a while, then it was twenty minutes at least to home, and by then the freshness of her drunk would be waning. And that would make the music wane beneath her hands, and that,

she knew, would make her smash something, something that she hoped this time would not be the piano. How boring it was to have to be so careful with the young, but it was only the young that she coveted. But how quickly, she observed, the intimate presence of Sanctissima aged them.

"I merely said what utter crap--only speaking to myself, sweetie." She could keep a kind face when drunk and a straight sober gaze, she knew, but her words, like her music at such a time, were beyond her control. "But I was thinking how truly individual, interesting and perfect you are--but only, only I say (like so very many others that I've known)--only when you're in heat. I was so very curious to see what you were like in heat, and yes, yes, you are very similar. What a similar person you are, Ellen! But then I thought, Oh, what utter crap! I've never heard anyone hiss 'Sanctisssss-ima!" quite like that before. No, never quite like that. Do you think you could possibly reproduce that sound, that delicious hissing for me again right now? Please go ahead and try it!"

She balanced herself against a tree and laughed in a voice that croaked, then cawed. The blue eagle-eye looked up and swept the lowering dark, measuring the distance between it and her head. Already, she could hear how the music would sound beneath her hands tonight.

Ellen gasped with pain and fell back onto the rock.

She held her body tight in her arms to keep some shreds of happiness still against it. But anger followed the shock, rolled in and absorbed the pain. The half-dead old drunk! The ridiculous old fool who thought she could pin Ellen down with that glinting, roving eye until the claws could tear her flesh, fur and all, into pieces fit to while the hours between the liquored recitals! Sanctissima was the ghost she wanted! Not precious Margaret! She closed her eyes and shook with passion at the thought of that tough narrow neck becoming ever-slimmer between her tightening hands.

Calmly Ellen asked, "That story? That love I was to undergo? Do you have anything to say about that now?"

Janet Sanctissima flicked her cigarette in a perfect burning arc into the water below them. The trees began to rustle with settling birds.

"Silly! You are undergoing it. Don't you feel wiser than the hills right now? Haven't I made a dear love, a dear story, a dear love story for you?" She sank down against the tree until she had assumed her curled, foetal position of the early afternoon. As she spoke, her voice fought against the perfect, even glissade of notes that were becoming louder every moment in her brain.

"Papa took our building superintendent's wife to his bed soon after the funeral. Couldn't sing a note, but by that time I was well on my way to perfecting my Chopin and

could provide sufficient artistic distraction for him. What a round, black, lusty little bundle she was, with breasts as cool and firm as marble! She was my first, she was, with her thirty-seven and me sixteen one lovely rainy afternoon while papa was out arranging his prodigy's first concert with the nice Rolls-Royce man's money. What a terrible time for Papa when father and daughter both had to get treatment for the clap! It hit him so hard it quite put him off the music for weeks. She, dear Betty Brown, put me off the music! But I played the concert, and well, and dedicated it all to her. Papa and I finally forgave each other and, indeed, became the fastest friends in the world the next year consoling one another when darling Betty Brown, irreplaceable Betty Brown, got done in by her husband's shiv. Papa and I were terrified, thinking it was us next, thinking that this excellent Mr. Brown with his endless patience and his master's touch with out broken-down furnace, had finally gone beserk with jealousy and meant to leave a trail of blood. But it was nothing so grand. It turned out, as he told them down at the precinct house quite truthfully, that he simply could not stand the sight of the unwashed dishes in the sink for one more day, and that the roaches on the filthy kitchen floor had become too numerous for a man of his simple tastes. But I still mourn sweet Betty Brown. And the camaraderie and the deep

sense of sharing that she inspired between Papa and me was something awfully noble in our lives. Papa and I must have wept together every night for a year after that, I into my rotgut, he into his lovely bushy red beard. I used to think that the least Papa could have done before he shot himself out on the Bowery that night was to make a will leaving me that great red bush of his. Nobody ever sees a pianist with a beard these days. You don't know what you're missing..."

Ellen observed the gathering darkness. If she stayed much longer without speaking her piece, she would miss dinner and starve as she led the chorus of the Trojan Women. Even now, precious Margaret and Mr. Pathways must be dying to get their hands on her. From the first reading of the play, she had had an equal hand in shaping and forming it into the production she and Mr. Pathways wanted. ("Ah!" Mr. Pathways had cried at each rehearsal, "if all these pubescent little dolts were only like <u>you</u>, Ellen, I might finally be able to give a Greek play in <u>Greek</u>!") She spoke quickly; her duties were waiting for her. There had been so much noise about Papa. As she spoke she began to walk toward the path that would take her out of the wood. As she walked, she ignored the eagle-eye fastened on her back: it was, after all, only an itch and she could bear it until she could scratch it privately and look, at her leisure,

for an antidote for its poison.

"This afternoon my father died, struck down, coincidentally, by a car, a big vulgar white Cadillac--nothing compared to a Fifth Avenue Rolls--while he was scooting around in his little electric mail-cart. Perhaps the white Cadillac will buy something for me! I know that my dear Papa and your Mother must be watching us together from Heaven at this moment, conversing quietly about their last breaths of life beneath the wheels of expensive cars. And Betty Brown is roasting her lusty little shape in the flames of Hell, eagerly awaiting the arrival of your soul. I'm surprised you've kept her waiting, but perhaps your dear Papa would no longer welcome the deep sense of sharing that so ennobled your characters. It would do me good to see that red beard of his black with ashes, but I don't expect to have the chance. Have I ever told you my feelings toward beards?"

After all, thought Janet Sanctissima, I won't get to play the piano tonight.

"What is that, dear Ellen? I'm so sorry."

"I can't really express the depth of sickness they inspire in me, but I will give you an approximation." Her voice was savage, but her pace up the hill was steady, measured, cool. Behind her, Janet Sanctissima's toe did not miss a root or a rock. Her stumbles punctuated Ellen's

voice.

"Beards are simply pubic hair transferred to the face, grown by men with secret yearnings for emasculation and womanhood. It is most disgusting when the pubic hair completely encircles the lips. Ha! Then, of course, they've got the world on the string--the masculine equipment hanging from its little forest below and a full-blown vagina, complete with teeth, in its identical little forest above. It's odd how few people observe this; it's odd how no one seems to find it wildly surreal to hear a female sex organ open up and start quoting the prices on the stock exchange. And people who fancy this exhibition seem even more peculiar than the bearded pseudo-hermaphrodites." She stopped on the path, turned to see how the stumbling Sanctissima was taking it. But Janet Sanctissima was standing tall, and looming, and furious.

"You have made it remarkably simple for me!" said Janet Sanctissima. Their faces were pale globes burning dimly through the dark, but one light shook with speech, and Ellen felt her wrist begin to crack in the claw that could speed so lightly up and down the treble clef.

"My father...my poor Papa! How sickening are the thoughts you think, Ellen! This poor man, with his innocent lust for lust and music! You never saw a man slip the barrel of a revolver into his mouth on a cold, winter Bowery

night while far uptown the crowds were screaming Brava! Bravissima! for some other young lady. And you quibble over the poor, tragic beast's beard. You repulsive girl. See my tears? See how you move me? Your beauty never made me weep. Oh, my poor Father and you wretched girl!"

"Shit on your father."

"Oh, it was so cold, there was ice on his beard that tinkled against the gun and made a noise like a xylophone as his mouth opened and his tongue curled to receive the bullet. I sat snuggled against him with my head on his shoulder in the narrow doorway--just room enough for the two of us and the voice we were hearing singing us to sleep --dreaming my nightmare of pink elephants. It was only when I heard that terrible dissonance of lead through brain and against bone that I realized it wasn't a nightmare I had been watching, that my eyes had been open all the time."

They were standing at the edge of the little wood. The path up through the trees had ended and girl figures were trotting through the clear soft shadows and into lighted doorways. The grip on Ellen's wrist was loosening and the voice against her ear was less tear-stained, was becoming brisk. An accidental clash of cymbals came through the dark. Janet Sanctissima's student was bustling across the quadrangle bearing her music and instruments, preparing to approximate Greek music for the play.

"At midnight," said Janet Sanctissima, "I will be taking off into the air on one of those stunning, whooshing jets, leaving here forever. Someone--you'd never dream her name in a million years--someone whom I loved twenty years ago decided last night to love me back and sent me a telegram telling me so. Can you guess what she's like? She is a most golden-haired, full-bosomed lady with a voice as shining as her head. I met her in our theory class twenty long years ago, and now, with her star rising even higher than the Heaven where that original golden singer watches over me, she has begged me to come with her, to stand in the wings and hold her atomizer, to shake out her cloak and muffle her throat and play the scales for her morning voice. And at night, at night she'll stand at the foot of the bed and sing that song, you-know-what, and then, then, unlike that original singer, get into the bed, into it! And she'll sing that song, that song--you-know-what: Sanctiiiiisima!"

Sanctissima dropped the cracked wrist and threw out her arms at the sweet air and the soft crashing of the disappearing cymbals. "Oh, thank God! Thank God! No more of the likes of you! No more peering at pretty crossed knees at eight in the morning, no more describing Bayreuth to pretty crossed knees at eight in the morning!"

Ellen took the ends of her damp, dirt-strewn hair

in her hand and watched Janet Sanctissima fold her hands behind her back and stroll off toward the thickest darkness, whistling the opening bars of her student's approximation of Greek music for the Greek play.

A gentle hand took Ellen's elbow.

"Oh, dear Ellen. Come on. Your mother's told me to take care of you tonight. Let's not be late. Look at your dear hair! Dear Ellen."

"Precious Margaret!"

When the new library had been completed, the campus nit-pickers had groaned. The nit-pickers (the youthful, devilist members of the English department, the art instructors, and Mr. Pathways, who constituted the entire faculty of Greek and Latin in his single bony frame) had stood before the shining domes and teakwood door handles of the Physical Education building (built fourteen years earlier while the library continued to be housed in the sub-basement of the Home Economics building) and looked at it facing them across the campus drive, and they groaned. It squatted before them, three stories of T-shaped, brilliantly colored red brick. The architect, either bowing before the ante-bellum pressure groups, or else wishing to remind the readers

of the great store of antique wisdom that lay inside his new brick walls, had ordered, as his final touch, a giant marble porch with six columns to be attached to the building's front entrace. Twenty broad steps of marble ascended to the porch on three sides. Viewed from a distance and with one eye shut, the effect was vaguely Parthenon. From another angle (and if one ignored the enormous bronze doors that took great strength to open) and with both eyes open, it was strictly Tara Hall.

One of the art instructors insisted that someone had squeezed a colossal jet from a can of Reddi-Whip cream onto a giant turd. And the beast that had relieved itself there on the site for the new library had swallowed a penny beforehand: that accounted for the bronze doors. Mr. Pathways, who was equally sensitive to aesthetics, agreed. He agreed until one of the devilish English instructors said, "Well, Pathways, at last you can move your Greek play off that soggy golf course this spring. It's no amphitheatre by a long shot, but wouldn't the girls look great draped around those columns in their draperies!" Then the new library building could not have found a stouter defender than the frail Mr. Pathways.

Crouched in the dark azalea bushes that grew against the side steps of the library, Janet Sanctissima's student tuned her guitar, rubbed one finger around the edge of a cymbal, touched the bass drum with her toe and handed two tamborines to her assistant who had returned at last with cigarettes. They began to chain-smoke and to wait. Out on the lawn before them, crouching on bleachers, the audience resembled huge fireflies as they sucked on their cigarettes. The night was chilly for May; the newly-soaked grass beneath the bleachers shifted in the night breeze and sent up slithers of damp into the trouser legs and short cotton skirts. Somehow the audience imagined that their burning butts warmed their fingers. The portable spotlights hidden in the bushes contrived to keep the library red brick in darkness and made the freshly-scrubbed white marble gleam an artificial rendition of Grecian sunshine that was perfectly acceptable to all but the most picayune.

A freshman climbed through the bleachers with a flashlight and bashfully distributed programs still warm from the mimeograph machine. On the cover was a freehand drawing of a broken Greek column; the same hand, even more freely had written below the drawing: THE TROJAN WOMEN/BY EURIPIDES/ PRESENTED BY THE REDWING COLLEGE FOR WOMEN CLASSICAL CLUB/ DIRECTED BY DR. LAWRENCE PATHWAYS AND ELLEN

FAIRBANKS.

Inside the program were listed all the names of the girls playing the parts of Poseidon, God of the Sea; Athene, a goddess; Hecabe, widow of Priam King of Troy; Chorus of captive Trojan women (this followed by the sixteen double names of the younger members of the Classical Club, names like Winnie Ruth Evans, Joanne Lee Furman, Sheila Jean Ramsey); Talthybius, a Greek Herald; Cassandra, daughter of Decabe (and, as the audience read this by the glow of the cigarettes, Ellen was beating on the Librarian's office door, and calling: "Margaret, let me in! Let me help you dress! Why does your costume have to be such a mystery? I'm so nervous alone here, I have to talk to you before this play begins, oh, please, Margaret, let me come in!" And Margaret would not open the door nor answer, although her silence was friendly); Andromache, daughter-in-law of Hecabe; Menelaus, a general of the Greek army (Mr. Pathways who stood aside watching Ellen and adjusting the robes in which he had played Hector, Agamemnon, Ajax, and every hero of the Aegean who had been fortunate enough to be inserted in one of the Redwing College Greek plays, felt a small eyelet of meaning open before him; and he wished that he were not a man so that he could help Ellen. For he liked her, and when she left there would be no other student to speak Greek with him);Helen, his wife.

Someone had slipped red gels into many of the spotlights and was causing them to flicker against the white marble: Troy's ruins were still smoldering two days after the city's capture. For a moment, the instinct to cry Fire! Fire! shuddered across the audience. In the bushes, Sanctissima's student put her lips to the flute, and its sound slunk through the heating air from high to low, from high to low, always minor. In the other pair of hands, two tambourines shook, trembled for three prolonged pulses of time, and stopped. The flute resumed, hysterical, keening: something was dead. Two girls, dressed in gold, pushed open the bronze doors against the flames and then stood guard against them. They pointed their spears at the audience, then raised them to point to Heaven. The flute shrieked, then was silent. The play had begun.

After much arguing over whether she should be given sedatives, over whether she should go home immediately, over whether she should simply be slapped and given a glass of ice water, they had finally left Margaret alone for the rest of the night in the librarian's office with Mr. Pathways.

It is toward dawn, the rosy-fingered dawn, thinks

Mr. Pathways as he lies on the leather couch and watches it coming across the shifting gray light. He closes his eyes for long moments, but some thud in Margaret's voice always awakens him and then he must reach for the restorative brandy to make his heart keep going. Each time, the thud from her voice seems to knock his heart unconscious. He has sweated with fear during the night more times than he can name. He thinks his heart is going to stop; he thinks he sees all the dead heroes gathering to bear him away on his puny shield to the house of shades. He wishes he could drive away this awful fantasy of flowers' scent that has possessed him all night, but each time he corks the brandy, the smell of flowers comes back. It stinks of my funeral in here, he thinks, but there's not a flower in the whole building. But he's had his nose pointed at the ceiling all night long, not at the floor. That's where Margaret's elegant wreath, her ribbon-entwined, florist-fashioned circle of flowers lies, on the thick tufted wool of the librarian's rug between Margaret's feet and Mr. Pathways' couch.

When Margaret had first snatched the flowers from her head and had flung them against the rug, several of the little turrets of tight pink rosebuds that the florist had carefully raised at intervals around the wreath, broke from their wires and scattered to many hiding places around the room, places where the librarian's foot would step and be

smeared with rose pulp many times before he would finally investigate his shoe sole and find the source of the sweet rotting odour that was clinging to him.

Margaret is again beginning to describe (for perhaps the tenth time) the scenes that had ocurred to end the Greek play some while before Euripides' final speech could be spoken. She does not mind that Mr. Pathways saw everything she saw, was stung by the same celebrating emotion when the real blood began to spurt from the real flesh; he must see it the way she sees it, she thinks. Or perhaps she is insisting on shaking off the oily drops of violence that cling to her skin in the same manner that the retreiver shakes off the swamp water from his fur after his swim for the dead duck. She does erupt into violent shaking at each re-beginning of the story, and she pulls the librarian's plaid blanket so tightly that she nearly chokes herself. As dawn begins its arrival, Mr. Pathways has had many chances to drown from the accumulation of tears and sweat that Margaret has thrown over him, but he does not seem aware of it. He listened once to her recital; now he merely passes over the brandy bottle and again lays his thoughts gently down on the shield of the single, small heroic act of his lifetime. He expects to die tonight, and he inspects his life from every angle as Margaret talks around him, trying to enlarge it, shine it up, make his swift action of that

evening appear more enormous and worthier of the rowdy, blood-strewn Greek-speakers who are waiting to get him.

Margaret said, "If only I had opened the door when she called me! But I was standing in front of the long mirror over there beguiling myself with the stunning _primavera_ that looked out of the glass at me. What murdering genius got into me and made me look at the Botticelli this afternoon and arrange myself like that to play a Greek, for God's sake? Ah, I know what it said, what got into me and said: look it's spring, earth's laboring and squeezing fresh mud and green shoots and wild flowers out from her gray damp thighs; and the sky's running blue mornings against our faces every day now; and Margaret, your sweet-lipped, new-eyed young face--how it could leap out and surprise Ellen again if you let your long yellow hair go free and tangled and crown it with a flower headdress. It took no time to get the yards of pale blue batiste and rope it against me with the gold cord. Did you see how bold and clever I was criss-crossing it around my breasts and shoulders? My little breasts in thin gold frames. I did it all to surprise Ellen's attention out of the bushes and trap it again in my own hands. I wanted to hear her gasp with pleasure over _me_ again...not over...as I sped through those doors screaming, crazy Cassandra, and shot into her sight like a blue rocket spring had aimed at her to wound her into

feeling for me again. And I was Spring herself, remember? I had dressed as Spring, not as the beaten, mad Greek child I should have been. As I ran on to the grass, she was swaying back and forth with the sixteen girls in the chorus. When she saw me, she stood stock still, breaking the rhythm --the others began to move disjointedly, pushing against each other, no longer flowing. Perhaps she thought I was going to burn her down with those torches I carried in my hands, treat her as the world's most fabulous arsonist would: after setting the whole world afire he has nothing left to burn but his own house. That mountain girl who made the music for the play was forgetting where we were all supposed to be. She had stopped that atmospheric flute and cymbal cunning just before I came into the lights. She was strumming the guitar just to herself I think, she was back home on a hill and what we began to hear were thinly-disguised tunes about early spring mornings, maidens so sweet and fair, cuckoos piping, urging on heartless bold young lovers. When I began to speak, she stopped. Do you remember when she began again? She went back to the flute, after all. I'll tell you. Ellen let me go on and on with Cassandra's speech. Maybe she had planned to. Looking back, I can detect her every move as I spoke, slipping inch by inch toward the climax she had planned for this play. It was as though she had secretly choreographed a dance that

she would insert into the play's action so quietly and quickly that it would have happened and been over with before anyone knew that Euripides had not written that the Trojans had a heroine who would rise up and change the course of history by leading a slaughter of the Greeks at the last minute. She watched my face (but everyone did) while I said, 'Come and dance, Mother, dance with me;/ Charm the Powers with lucky words,/ Loudly chant your daughter's wedding-song!/ Wildly whirl and turn in purest ecstasy!/ Maids of Troy,/ Wear your brightest gowns/ Come, and sing my wedding-song,/ Hail the lover Love and Fate appoint for me!' Look at it this way: poor demented Cassandra who cannot see her life, like her city, in ruins around her, prattling on and on about her happy, happy wedding day; it can't get through to her that she's bound for the slave market and some Greek's bed. And Ellen's seeing her crazy joyful face and thinks well, why not? Why shouldn't the poor dear have some luck in life after all that tortuous prophesying she's gone through for us? Let's grab a Greek and murder the bloody bastard and save Cassandra for ourselves! I think I saw that kind of look in her eye while she waited for me to finish speaking, all the time sneaking her hand into some secret place in her white nylon draperies and coming out with that steak knife. Have you ever seen anything so bright, the way it caught the light and bounced it back against all our eyes,

more efficient than the moon in lighting up the dark? She went up through the bleachers with her arm stuck up straight as a stick, the knife at the end of it, ready to take that murdering Greek in the heart. Sanctissima didn't move. She must have known Ellen was coming for her, but she didn't move, just watched the light move across the steel as it went down for her chest. What still amazes me is how the chorus followed her. They were so used to her leading them that they went blind as sheep right behind her into the second row. What Sanctissima must have thought watching the knife go down into her with sixteen girls bending over her, their eyes and lips outlined in those thick horror-masks of black grease, with Ellen in the middle of them, spitting, hissing, "Sanctiiiisima! Sancti-si-ma!" as she went for her heart! Thank God Ellen doesn't know where the heart is!

"How quickly you move, Mr. Pathways! Suddenly you were there, the knife was in your hand, Ellen was sprawled somewhere in the dark grass and your arm was supporting Sanctissima while she bled red all over her white shoulder. I told you I saw Sanctissima's face when the knife was going for her. I swear she wouldn't have minded dying! She was very excited. She was so bored when they bandaged her shoulder and kept nagging at her to press charges. Did you see how dull her whole body was when they bundled her into

the car and took her to meet the airplane? Her face never lighted up again the way it did when the knife was flashing through the air to meet her. But perhaps it was just the light from the knife that her face was reflecting, nor her own light. Though Sanctissima's not that way--she's no dead passive planet like the moon that reflects some other world's shining and energy. She'd never do that. No, she was lighting up herself for that knife.

"Even before the play began I had started it rolling. I wanted Sanctissima to give Ellen back to me. I met her this afternoon in the dormitory parlor and gave her, without a word, a snapshot my mother had taken of Ellen and me when we were five years old. We're standing in a bunch of hollyhocks higher than our heads. We're wearing puffy little matching bloomers and we're brown and barefooted. Ellen's hair was blacker than it's ever been and mine was bleached out by the summer sun. We're standing in the hollyhocks with our arms around each other in big bear hugging, and our eyes are squeezed tight shut with delight, or against the sun. I can't remember. I wanted that woman to know how she couldn't upset fate and love and history! What I was destined for! She was down in the woods with Ellen all afternoon. She took the picture with her, absentmindedly, just stuffing it into a pocket and going. I nearly screamed watching her do that. I had put a warm, precious curse on

her and her rusting Ellen-seducing machinery. And I thought I had lost when she just took my spell--which should have burned a hole through the palm of her hand--and tossed it in a pocket and marched off. The sumptious, swinging marching of the pair of them across the grass! Into the trees! I held my breath, and Ellen stumbled on a rock or a root the moment they entered the wood. Our sweet friendship there in the dark of that woman's pocket reached out with one blunted baby finger and tripped Ellen, and made Sanctissima's machinery cough and spit steam and halt! And then I had the peace of mind to spend the afternoon fixing the blue batiste around my breasts and hips, instructing the florist. I was a gift-wrapped package--spring returning to the dead earth--wasn't I? I see it all, don't you? I thought Ellen was dead. I was the huge, quick season that would land on her, make her breathe and bloom again. My repulsive blue among the white chorus; my ignorant flowers that caused her to beg for death. I'll never see her again. Where did she go? How did she disappear? I swear I shall never touch anything again."

Margaret's peach face is clinging to her skull, skin withering into thin soiled tissue. Thumbs have punched back her eyes. Her hair is a lank, yellow rag soiling the edges of the librarian's blanket.

A slight breeze stirs from somewhere in the room. Mr.

Pathways opens his eyes and examines the fact that morning brings: he is going to live. He concentrates on denying himself any emotion connected with the fact. The heroes had watched him all through the dark and had again left without him, again finding him wanting. He drew back his lips, he bared his teeth at the glimmering rosiness that was leaning through the window. He wanted to howl. He reached over and switched off the lamp. In the corner, a smudged, crushing outline of Margaret in the blanket crouched on the floor. He wished to be in the blanket too, wrapped up in darkness again, still having a chance.

He said, "You simple slaves. You girls are simple slaves. That is the one thought that has sustained me all my failed life here in this pesthole. Girls are meant to be slaves, even when they prophesy, even when they rip through a tragedy dressed as spring embodying the crazed notion that it is good to whirl this stinking planet on one more revolution of fertility. The one thing in life I love--and I don't even know if I pronounce it correctly! Perhaps that's why they won't wait for me, come for me--they don't understand a word when I call them. You absurd girl! Burn Sanctissima or burn Ellen in a cloak of poison! Have children and murder them! Spill blood and go raving mad. That is life-sized activity for free women. But you simple slaves, you simple Margaret-slave, you twiddle in the dark

about causing magnificent Ellen to kill, willing her to murder by dressing as sweet springtime, wanting to own Ellen! No woman ever caused another woman to do anything! You've wasted my night. If anyone was the stimulus it was Sanctissima, but she's not a woman, nor a man. Those women are neither here nor there. They're outside of this seasonal life we're bound and gagged against. If they're anywhere, they're back with my lovely language that I can't pronounce. Hush that crying. It makes no difference. A soldier young as she is, in ill-cut khaki, with a face like a raw Texas beef-steak came out from behind the bleachers when Ellen fell to the grass. He grabbed her by the wrist and ran with her. Disappear! Ha! But if she is on a slave ship now, it will sink, I know it will sink, even if she has to drown with it."

Mr. Pathways stood up, pulling his Menelaus costume into place. Then, with a slow second thought, he began to pull the Menelaus costume off, carefully, keeping it neat for another year, from his body. He pulled himself across the carpet to Margaret on his hands and knees, close against the floor to avoid the long red streaks that were now entering the window in droves. But as he crept into the dark blanket with her and lifted himself above her, the sunrise caught him full in the eyes; and when the rosy-fingered dawn stroked his face, fully, from brow to chin, Mr.

Pathways howled.

Margaret feigned sleep, but through her closed eyelids she too could see the ruddy hobgoblin with the luminous eyes come shuffling through the window. She could hear it shriek at her. When the abrupt, trembling hand closed on her breast, she welcomed it and shielded it with her own hand.

He muttered in her her, "Soon you will fall, and lie
With the earth you loved, and
none shall name you!"

"All right," said Margaret.

He whispered, "Earth and her name are nothing;
All has vanished, and Troy is nothing!"

"All right."

He said, "'Farewell, Troy!
Now the lifted oar
Waits for us:
Ships of Greece, we come!'"

"All right," said Margaret.

It's my heart that's running, my brain, my arms, my guts, my nerves that are running, my red and my white corpuscles are racing each other! Only my legs are flying, the hard thud that shakes my heels second by second is the concrete of air, soon the concrete will rise and envelop all of me, the shimmering sweat that's melting me, my

gasping lungs. All day long my wrist has been gripped to the bone and I've been yanked to destinations not on my map. Off the concrete--bare white feet soaking in wet black grass--sleepless children looking out their windows will scream they've seen a ghost pass in long authentic white ghost draperies, it's a headless ghost, mother, with black streamers whizzing across the blank space where the head should be! How superstition begins: wide-eyed children see running girls; running, mad, flat-bellied girls, the mothers of superstition. She was chasing after a poor soldier boy; her hand was on him, mother! Crush! the feet are against fanged stones, it's the town-side entrance to the woods. You aren't out of the woods yet...scented claws and slaps are flaying my face alive, the poor soldier boy ducks, the branches lift their leaves and slap my eyes. He can't find the path, "Watch it! There's water running here!" Witches can't float, he knows; he didn't rescue me to drown me. Let me out! Let me out, let me out--I'm back to the green and drawsy and sputtering beat of this season, the pulse of this wood. I'm being pulled again and things are crawling over me, tough-backed insects, pale leaves turning thick and dark against my skin before my very eyes, earthworms that coil, retract, coil, retract in their progress up my bare leg, flowers that shake pollen that sticks to my skin; and the trees are livid; my hand will come off

in his hand and he'll keep running, the one-handed moaning girl will wander through the wood until the goblins come and give her a bucket for a hand and fill it full of her desires; in their underground caves, she'll drink and eat from her hand. "Keep on running!" Run me to still life--a composition of cheap red and blue neon, Teddy's, a winking sign, a dim place without flourishes, not even a college boy will drink there in the high backed leatherette booths, with ash-trays humpbacked with old butts, with little ladies --topheavy, bottom heavy little ladies shoehorned into satin and nylon--crosslegged at the bar from 9 pm till closing when the cloistered gamblers hear the rap at the back room door, leave the cold dice and maybe make a bet on flesh.

They leaned against the wall until their breaths came more slowly than the blinking of Teddy's name above them.

"Godalmighty! look at you! Can I take you inside? I guess I can, I guess this old place's seen worse. The blood's come off your hand on mine; baby, that's the thing you fix first in the little girl's room. You do that and I'll talk clothes talk with the little ladies inside--you can't screw around no longer in that white nightie-night--Estelle maybe'll get something pretty around you then we can drink a little, dance a little and who-know's what. You ain't the first little lady I pulled out of a bad spot.

Goddamned high-tone bad spot I pulled you out of, but scratch the skin and underneath you ain't any less hot-blooded than any other female I run with in my life, like little sister Bethel--didn't I or didn't I not get her cross the state line when she up and carved her husband one real hot day then bonked her kids over the head with a Ne-hi bottle--I did do it and didn't ask no questions at any time neither. To this day we still send postcards--I mail to Jacksonville, Biloxi, all over and still don't ask no questions of her or any woman. Women love me. Why don't you tell me your name?"

"Eustacia Vye."

"Jesus!"

"And yours?"

"Uh-uh. Recollect our deal? I don't ask no questions and you don't either."

"Why did you pull me out of there? I know I didn't kill her; I didn't have to run."

"Well why do you think? I come there to get you and have a date. After I go to that kind of trouble I don't expect the disappointment of seeing my date get hauled out of sight somewhere for the third degree, I don't care what she's done. That's another reason why women love me, I'm dependable."

Ellen looked straight into his face. It had not changed since her first meeting with it the day before, but

now she considered it for the first time. There was not a trace of irony in it: it was a face composed of thick human meat, and plain unvarnished truth; his eyes were bright shallow wells of blue artlessness. His hair was blond, nearly white, with not a shadow in it. She had an impulse to tell him her real name, but did not.

"You think we can go in now?" she said.

"Sure. You just light out straight for that door at the end of the bar--here's my comb--and you get to combing and washing while I have a little talk with Estelle. And you stay back there till Estelle comes with the clothes."

"Will she?" She shuddered; she could turn and run, she could throw herself at a policeman or bang on the door of the house across the street where the blue glow of the television flickered images of cowboys and hair dye through the windows. Someone would come and take her back to the college where she could weep into the clean infirmary pillow and watch their eyes widen at the story of the wickedness of Sanctissima and the farm-boy soldier-boy criminal. The college psychiatrist would soothe her with sedatives and words of Freudian comfort, and the next day she would graduate with Margaret and be supported in the late afternoon at her father's graveside. Why didn't she run? Through the house's window, the cowboys were lynching an innocent Mexican; the family lifted drumsticks and thighs to their

mouths, chewed, swallowed and saw the Mexican hang. It would only take a moment to get inside, and they would give her chicken and the easiest chair before the TV while they made the phone call. She couldn't run: the traffic through the rabbit's hole is downward, and one-way.

She fell heavily against the soldier boy.

"Ho boy! Don't you go pulling a woman thing on me now! Just get you inside and ol' Teddy'll fix you in no time with one of his little specialties." Through the thick, swinging door, he held her by the elbow, and her feet slid rapidly across the star-and-moon patterned linoleum, feathery with dirt, and her head through a beery muggy haze. Another, thinner door clicked behind her. Inside the little cement cell, the air was heavy with cold and lysol. The toilet in one corner was white and scrupulously clean. Facing it was a dressing table with a round unframed mirror above it and a flowered chintz skirt around it. The sink had only one faucet; it ran cold water. Written on the wall around the roller towel was a hodge-podge of first names, telephone numbers, valentines and cupid's arrows, obscenities; drawings of enormous erect phalluses. All were done in lipstick, in shades ranging from pink to purple. Ellen read them all thoroughly, wondering who's Lynn, who's Betty Ann, who's Mick The Greatest Fuck in Town, wondering if anyone had answered the advertisement, Want Sex Tonight? Call

194-555. When there was no more to wonder about, to keep thought and recollection away, Ellen began to use the room, flushing, running the cold water until her hands and face were dazed and could not move from it, combing until her scalp ached in front of the mirror, vivid with her still face and swift hands and crackling hair. The cold was beginning to cut bone deep beneath the ragged, grass-smeared tunic; the lysol was forming tears beneath her eyelids; the walls of the cell were creeping forth slowly but inevitably to crush her. When she could bear the bare tube of white neon above the mirror, which allowed for no shadows, any longer, she threw her hands around her face and crawled beneath and hunched beneath the skirt of the dressing table. Outside the room--if there was an outside to this room--there was a juke box against the wall. Someone fed it dollars in change; the skirt to the dressing table, Ellen's pointing elbows, the tin box containing the roller towel began to vibrate to the ground tone of the basses, began to shake in syncopation against the beat of the electric guitars. "I wuzzzz the o'there woman!" came the music.

"Well I don't see nobody," said a voice to itself.

Ellen came out and saw Estelle; "Yes, she's here--I'm here," she answered.

"There's one thing Teddy don't allow in this bar, niggers and fuzz-action. White you are, but sure as hell

hiding in the little girls' looks to me like expectation of fuzz-action and Teddy'll be sore as hell if such occurs both at the fuzz-action's object and that there object's accomplices, namely soldier boy and me!"

Estelle seemed to be made out of chunky but smooth-running, well-oiled machine parts, each fitted neatly on top of the other. Only her red hair was allowed to go free and untamed from its black roots and swish about the back of her nylon blouse. Beneath the thin, ruffled nylon, a black satin brassiere stood out, huge, pointed and business-like, with every stitch and hook doing its efficient best. Her motorized hips, that curved abundantly and immediately out from her waist, were channeled into neat red faille lined with a slithery sounding taffeta. A long slit up the skirt showed a muscular thigh in black net and the pure white strap of a garter belt. Estelle carried a huge black pocketbook; a Dumaurier cigarette worked its way from one corner to the other of her purple mouth, and its smoke made her eyes wince behind their shutters of mascara.

Ellen, intimidated by it all, smiled at all of it.

"I'm harmless," she said.

"That ain't what I heard," said Estelle, heaving the big black bag to the dressing table. "But I'll give you the benefit there; but putting us on, you are, kid. If there's one thing I know in my life it's how to do a turtle-

snap with my cunt, the Scripture, and Thomas Hardy. I was born with that turtle-snap, but I achieved the other two holed up for a two-week stretch with a drunk in this very town's lowliest fleabag. Being drunk, the drunk could not take much advantage of my natural talent, but still he would not pay me nor let me go. At the end of two weeks he said, when his wife returned from her mother's, he would let me out stuffed with bread if only I had patience. So while he slept and drank (drink which I do not touch in any form because it spoils the style) and ofttimes tried to get it up, I read the Gideon Bible and the smart-ass bell-hop's Collected Works of Thomas Hardy which I got in exchange for a quick turtle-snap whilst the employer slept. Eustacia Vye, shit! That is one chick you are not."

"Estelle? You're Estelle."

"Call me anything you like just don't call me late for supper!" Estelle exploded with a laugh at her joke that propelled her onto the dressing table stool and caused her cigarette (still deeply embedded in one corner of the purple) to wiggle upwards a panicky little smoke signal.

Ellen pulled at her own smooth black mane, wishing she could stroke the electric mop that shook with Estelle's giggling across the nylon back. She was being drawn into a warm, slow-heating oven of security. Estelle's professional hauteur, her straight-backed self-confidence was, to

Ellen, as restful and gorgeous as sleep.

"I'm sorry about Eustacia Vye. It was just an idea. I'll tell you or soldier boy or Teddy, anybody, my name; it's..."

Estelle held up her hand. "Just a minute, sugar," she interrupted; "as far as I and Teddy and Soldier Boy are concerned you just want to go on like you started. Who's soldier boy, after all? Just old AWOL, long-time AWOL soldier boy. Just call him Diggory Venn--that'll straighten me up for a few laughs when I hear it! As Jesus Christ says, What's in a name?--Leviticus 4:15!"

There was impatient rapping at the door. "Don't answer," said Estelle, suddenly getting busy and pulling out clothing from her bag. "That'll be nobody but old Diggory getting bugged with the crap game and wanting a handful of hot tail--you, I guess. The girls know they can take a leak in the men's if they have to."

"What in the fuck is happening in there? You've had time enough to dress her for a wedding!" Soldier boy began kicking against the door. "Get a move on or else this guaranteed made-of-honey mother-fucker is going huff and puff and blow you-all's house in!"

Estelle stamped on the Dumaurier butt. Unencumbered by the cigarette, her voice came out deep and resonant. "Cool it! You sweet sonuvabitch, cool it!" she bellowed.

Soldier boy stopped his kicking. The juke box clicked and whirred and, at top volume, spoke: Shake it up baby! Twist and Shout! Estelle's mouth penetrated upward through the thick matte of her makeup and ended in a grin.

"Dancing!" she breathed. "Teddy's going let us dance!" There were shuffling, thudding noises against the linoleum outside. "Honey! I got to go dance! Get those clothes on and use that lipstick, come on out an' I'll dance with you! Can you shake that thing? My best girl-friend Annie Laurie can't shake that thing a-tall! She is one drag for dancing--hurry!" Estelle slung her shoulders back and rotated her hips in a well-greased fashion. She let the door slam behind her.

Ellen stood before the mirror and looked herself directly in the eye. She saw that she was neither more nor less than an Easter lily in mid-July--rotting in its silver-foiled pot, its petals blackened and stinking. She remembered the exchange of dandelions between baby Margaret and baby Ellen. If Sanctissima is dead, they'll give me rhinestoned harlequin sunglasses to wear and they'll peroxide my hair into a blazing beehive of yellow. Stiletto heels, rhinestone earrings, tight skirt. Led into court by fat-jowled detectives. To make my aspect fit for print. There was a burst of excitement in the courtroom today in the third month of the trial of Ellen Fairbanks for the murder

of Janet Sanctissima. Occasionally crossing and uncrossing her shapely legs, Miss Fairbanks gave her version of the tragedy to which she pleads not guilty. "I believe that Greek is the most vicious and corrupting course of study to which a young girl can be exposed, especially if the young girl is as innocent and trusting about life as was I," began Miss Fairbanks. "Let me hasten to say that it is not only learning the Lord's Prayer in Greek that so ill-befits the young virgin, but also her involvement--her actual performance in!--those grotesque parodies of real life known as the ancient Greek drama. Those plays, which were generally written by hedonistic, sex-crazed perverts--and dead these many years--are highly commended to her by cynical professors who often share the immoral predelictions of the playwrights themselves. Urged by her professors to immerse herslef in the often un-Christian and definitely un-American viewpoints which these plays express, the young girl's impressionable brain is quickly warped. Her mind is beset by lurid visions; her gentle upbringing is snickered at by her professor who insinuates such examples of true womanhood into her clouded thinking as Medea! Electra! Hecube! Cassandra! Sappho! I blush to name their crimes--incest, child-murder, insanity, fortune-telling; a woman writing love poetry to other women, of all things! It is not long before the girl has forgotten her true destiny as wife,

homemaker, mother of decent American citizens. She gives back her engagement ring, she breaks the heart of the clean-minded young man who has dreamed of leading her, radiant and unsullied to the altar on that glad day when he has made his first down-payment on the ranch-style split level which they so often dreamed of together, parked in the moonlight. Her sewing machine lies neglected; she fails her Home Economics course in Nutrition for a Family of Six. How long does it take before she is seen in the company of rowdy companions, tasting, perhaps, her first cocktail? How long is it before she is solely and simply Out for a Good Time? How long is it before she is spending her days--and, Oh, my friends, her nights!--in the company of females of hideous reputation around whom rumors of neckties abound! All unknowing of the hell that awaits her, of the honest tears that weep for her, she takes her final step into degradation, aping the sentiments expressed by that unfortunate creature--Greek, of course--who pressed her unnatural affections on similar innocents thousands of years ago--and then had the gall to write about it! I do not mince my words--as unlikely as it seems, there is sex! Sex everywhere! Even outdoor sex! Yes, my friends, it has all happened to me, the miserable creature you see before you now. There I was, enmeshed in unholy passion by the experience crafty Sanctissima, and there I was in the performance of

that devil-inspired play, The Trojan Women! Did I know what I was doing when I secreted that steak knife in the brief, immodest garment that I wore before the leering throng? Did I really have a calculated plan for murder! That I cannot tell you, my friends. Redeemed as I am today, it is hard to look back and decipher the monstrous thoughts of the young sinner that I was yesterday. I only know that as I stood mouthing those unrhymed obscenities with my other misguided sisters, there suddenly came a vision to me of purity, cleanliness, innocence--a vision of spring-time virtue as untrammeled and fresh as spring's own tight pink rosebuds! Before this loveliness--heaven-sent, I know--I could feel the filth of my behavior creeping through my soul like a giant worm! I turned; there before me, grinning suggestively, was Sanctissima--she who had tipped the scales entirely in favor of perdition, she who had led me that final step into lechery and good times! I saw her: She was Evil personified. My friends, I could not, with a single stroke of a knife, wipe out and rid the world of Euripides, Socrates, Plato, Aescylus,--and the translators and purveyors of their wretchedness, Gilbert Murrey, H.D.F. Kitto, Phillip Vellacott, to name but a few--but I could kill Sanctissima, I could forestall the corruption of others like myself. And with that vision of sweet springtime virtue blazing before me, I reached out and stabbed Sanctissima in the heart--her

black heart! Yes, I plead not guilty. Your real villain, your real murderer, my friends, is on the shelves of your home libraries, is now in the hands of your sons and daughters as you pay good money for their educations. Your murderer, my friends, is The Greek Drama!" The sensation in the courtroom following Miss Fairbanks's delivery was only halted when Judge Onassis Mercouri sentenced Miss Fairbanks to the electric chair.

But if Sanctissima is alive, thought Ellen, if I did not kill her, perhaps she is at home wishing I were with her. Perhaps she has changed her mind, and loves me!

Ellen threw herself on her knees before the toilet; vomit warbled in her throat. When she was finished she drenched her face again in water and dressed herself in Estelle's clothes.

"May I have this here cha-cha?" said Soldier Boy.

Ellen lifted a numb arm to clink martini glasses with Estelle, but no clink came. She focussed her eyes. The place where Estelle had been across the table was wiped clean and dry. Estelle's ashtray was empty and polished.

"She is long gone," said Soldier Boy. "Sunday is the busy night for Estelle. Let's have some of that there

fancy tail-work you was showing off with her!"

How simple, how lovely it is to dance on the linoleum with Soldier Boy and Estelle! I float, I shummer with the beat; I am Fred Astaire dancing on the ceiling, I am the original Hootchie-Cootch!

"Cha-Cha-Cha! O shake that thing, Sugar!" Soldier Boy was a great, white-headed turkey, he danced with his face lifted up in a jubilant smile, his arms akimbo and flapping, trying to take off with him. The cha-cha music ended in a smash of brass. Soldier-Boy stopped dead, his arms poised in mid-air, his head cocked to catch the next sound. Ellen fell forward, hooking her chin on Soldier Boy's shoulder; the music started and he gathered the rest of her up and started pushing her around the moon and stars beneath their feet.

"That's just what I thought I punched next," he said. The music swayed and went bump every fourth beat. With every bump, Soldier Boy's knee knocked against Ellen's crotch, a small, but important, bash against the bone.

"Looooo-ve is a manny splintered thang!" sang Soldier Boy loudly, as much to the rest of Teddy's Bar as to Ellen. "This is what I like the best...romance music." He tilted Ellen first forward, then back; then the knee back in the crotch. "It's the Ap-rell rose that only grows in the earrrly sprang... You should have been here last month.

Teddy decided to put on some class, so he picked me. Every Sunday night I got to wear this white jacket? And a black bow tie? And I'd start the ball rolling with Love is a Many Splintered Thang and end up with a real rouser, Give Me Some Men Who Are Stout-Hearted Men which is what I learnt in high school before they said shoo, boy, out of this here school because I tried a little on, well, raped, I guess, the English teacher. It went just great for two Sundays in a row when Teddy said I got to cut it out because the customers wanted to watch the fights then. I said I would sing after the fights, but Teddy said No, and I just happen to know it wasn't the fights was why I had to quit what was going to be my career once I get out of this Service but old Estelle fucking my act up. She was just jealous, being nothing but a old piece of good ass with no career and she would yell out just when I was singing Give Me Some Men and shout me down yelling: Give Me Some Men Who Are Stout-Hearted Men and I'll Soon Show You Ten-Thousand Whores! And it got everything ruined for me just when they all had got talking about getting me on Ted Mack's Amateur Hour. Ain't that right, Teddy?" Soldier Boy sang the rest of Give Me Some Men, but to the tune of Love is a Many-Splintered Thang.

It was Teddy tapping her on the shoulder. He was all enormous beer belly, which was swathed in a huge white

wrap-around apron that swept the floor like the hem of a cassock.

"We got to close. Get out, Soldier Boy. Let me tell you. That there is jail-bait you got there."

Soldier Boy stopped dancing, and leaned close against the beer belly. Ellen, without music and unsupported, sank to the harmless floor.

"You watch out, Teddy," said Soldier Boy, "what you call my dates. If you look close you will see that she is wearing one of Estelle's most favulous creations--it is, if you will look close, not even her work clothes but a nice black dress with a built-in bra that she wears to collect unemployment in. That goes to show just how much we trust this hear so-called jail-bait. And this here so-called jail-bait just happened to knife somebody tonight, so I wouldn't go around calling that underage if I was you. I'd watch my mouth if I was you."

It was not only dark inside her head, she realized, but everywhere. The air was no longer full of beer fumes, but scented with the first of June. It was the first day of June,flowers were exhaling sweets. A red streak of dawn bent over and touched her.

Before Soldier Boy pulled the shade down, his window commanded a fine view of Teddy's sign, which blinked once, twice, and then went out. Outside the shade a thin haze of exhaustion bloodshot with sun was becoming day. It flapped the shade and bumbled through the rented room, binding Ellen's ankles and, pretending to be air, soaked her lungs until her arms, shoulders, head and belly hung low as though she were some meat-hook's carcass; and the meat-hook was between her numb shoulders. In the corner of her eye, there was a dancing ghost shedding its clothes: one shoe off, then a hop and a skip and the trouser leg about the ankle; one shoe on with a lace too knotted to loosen beneath thick fingers and whimpers of frustration. As he bent and pulled, Soldier Boy's dog tags jingled among the light fur on his chest; without either of them knowing how it happened, his shirt had come off. Soldier Boy gave up the dance and fell, heavily, to his hands and knees.

"Hell hell help me!" he said, sobbing against the lavender fringe of the bath mat beside his bed. "Eustacia! If only the shoe would come off, the pants won't come off without the shoe comes off... Eustacia!"

"In a minute."

The light in the room is dyed yellow by the shade at the window; the light in the window is outlined by gray

leftover night; the light has a ghost in its arms. Soldier Boy, hunched over the mat, makes a noise with the noises the birds are beginning to make--sleepy condescending noises at the day. She cannot tell whether it is harsh breathing or weeping. There is the color of a bird's song painted in her throat; she feels it there. One bird outside has broken with the noise and has begun to sing. There is the color of the air in the room, air changing to water and filling the room and pushing against her skin with the crush of velour. Soldier Boy will drown first; his mouth is open, inviting the water to let him contain all of it. Standing there against the window frame, waiting for the minute to be up, she is dreaming of the long slow motions of her mother's evenings in the three-personed country that Ellen came from--the final clank of knife and fork together and her mother's hands hold the heavy silver handles in a brief pause above the china's rim and let them drop. Ellen and her father lift up smiles to her, and she smiles back at them, but speechless, before her journey into the evening. But perhaps they are all smiling at the regular barks, beginning not a second too soon, of the neighbors' white dog, Happy, who has come for the leftovers. Ellen's mother leaves her chair and her napkin draped on the chair. In a moment, there is a rustle of her apron getting untied and thrown to the floor beneath the piano, and the rustle of air flipping against their forks,

for the sound; and when it comes, they begin to chew again. Never anything but Chopin and Liszt. "That other stuff, you know? It's just too hardheaded for me these days." Meaning Bach and Beethoven, the others, that she loved to see Ellen learn. On and on, until ten o'clock when the postman's newspaper was folded and smoothed and inserted with yesterday's into the magazine rack; and the postman's wife folding shut the piano lid and carring the little saucer of nearly a pack's worth of cigarette butts and ashes that had smoked and burned for her while she played out into the black garden to pour on some young flower bed "where they will do some good." And then the last lap of her journey, beginning the expedition to morning, the wife leads the postman up the narrow flight of steps (and Ellen smiling, speechless at their going and leaving her alone, at them, through the thick-bosomed, wide-hipped bannister railings, at the thought of them together at the top of the stairs, in the giant bed, in the huge room.) Would the evenings of the postman's wife now become much longer, slower, smoother, without the postman? Without the rattle of the newspaper to hush the piano, how long would the mazurkas and waltzes and "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" and "Abide with Me" go on? By dawn, the saucer will be overflowing on to the ivory keys and the postman's wife will be out of tunes and cigarettes. The giant's bed, if she ever reaches it, will swallow the postman's wife whole and, though

they pummel and pound and shake the linen and beat the mattress, they will never find a sign that her body's lain there--except perhaps a nicotine stain where her fingers have rubbed or the sound of some jittery clicking in the room--again, unmistakeably, her fingers, or the ghost of them, remembering the long runs and trills, forgetting the piano lid's shut tight. Ellen in the bed, Ellen dreams, will weight it: Ellen propping open the jaws of the giant's bed with her own body while the postman's wife sleeps easy.

Someone in the street below slams a door and shouts, "Are you ready? Let's Go." Another door shuts, and Ellen looks to see two men go off in a maroon Buick with fishing poles.

A minute, at least, was up. Her drunk, warm and woven about her since Teddy's second martini, was beginning to shred and let in drafts of pain and anxiety. The largest hole in the fabric was between her eyes and someone was stupidly filling the hole with bricks and morter. It was time to move away from the window and pull off Soldier Boy's trousers; only when she lay bouncing beneath him would she allow herself to see the President of Redwing giving her description to the FBI. And would Soldier Boy finish and receive her gratitude before his door burst open against the shoulders of the men in pin-striped, double-breasted suits... she hoped they would pull Soldier Boy free before they blazed

at her with their heavy revolvers... it was Humphrey Bogart in a slouch hat pointing the muzzle of the gun at her temple.

Soldier Boy's hair glimmered on the bathmat; the windowshade flew out and pressed sun against it; sun absorbed his hair and made it invisible. He crouched there like a huge muscled infant asleep in its crib. Soldier Boy was a-sleep, his knees drawn up beneath his belly, his arms tucked beneath his chest. A very happy smile was on his face. Ellen reached for his dog-tags, stealthily moving her hand in the chest fur, wondering how she would feel if she read "Diggory Venn" on them. When she touched the silvery disc, Soldier Boy sighed deeply, took the tags in his own hand and held them tightly. Ellen sat back on the mat and watched him sleep; then she lay down to join his sleeping.

Mr. Pathways stood at the door and said, " ."

Ellen, being mesmerized into sleep, by the ball of sun that Soldier Boy's head had become, did not lift her eyes, or turn, but spoke and translated, "'Where are the roses?'"

"

"'Where are the violets?'"

"

"'Where is the beautiful parsley?'"

Soldier Boy slept on, twitching in his dreams like an old dog. Three people in the room were awake, with looks on their faces as if they were hungering for food, or considered each other food. Pathways had moved aside in the room, and behind him was Margaret, already dressed and polished for graduation, dressed as though she intended to represent Virtue until the end of her days. She held a little compact mirror before her lips, admiring the finesse of the pink hue against the color of her face which was exactly the shade of the bleached bones of a desert rat and seemed about to crumble into dust. When she spoke, it was into the mirror; and she continued to speak to the mirror: her lips spoke to her and she answered the lips.

She rattled off the answers to the baby Greek: "Here are your roses, here are your violets, here is your beautiful parsley!" Red, violet and green she described herself, to herself; but not a trace of those colors lingered on her, and she had been a girl garnished with them the night before.

"Let us go, Ellen, now before he wakes up," said Mr. Pathways. "I am very weak, ever so weak, weaker this morning than I have ever been. I would loathe having to fight this Hercules, this Ulysses for the prize that he has fairly won. Ah, things look very black, very black!" He spoke sadly into the enormous voltage of illumination shed into

the room by the sun, the hair on Soldier Boy's head, white Margaret.

Ellen got up slowly, unwinding herself from the bath-mat first to her knees and then to her feet and found that legs, even when violently trembling, when they were your own, they could support you.

"I had intended," she said to the sleeping head on the floor, "to just go right on belonging to him, spreading my legs, you know; spreading whatever of myself he wished me to. It's in the nature of the debt, you know; or, as you say, teacher, behaving properly as a properly captured prize should..."

"He's no conquering Greek. You're no grief-stained Spartan." Mr. Pathways seemed to have changed his mind.

"Je ne comprends pas," said Margaret into her mirror.

"He said he would hide me under a blanket in the back of his maroon Buick until we got out of town, then a-cross the state line. Then he'd let me sit up front with him, and we were off to find sister Bethel in Jacksonville. Then he would get rid of the maroon Buick, wipe off all our fingerprints and then steal a fishing boat. We'd live with the fishing and Bethel all day. He expected when he got the hang of the water life, he could steal a yacht and take us to Paris France where he'd keep us as swell as he could in sweet perfume and silk dressed with built-in bras; and lock

us in at night while he went out and learned French."

"'The Wind-dark sea...'" said Mr. Pathways, lowering his eyelids against the light in the room.

"Je ne comprends pas," said Margaret into her mirror. The sun shifted, and the mirror began to flash signals against the wall.

"Sanctissima's not dead," said Pathways. "To us, she doesn't even exist anymore. Things are very quiet, ever so quiet, back at Redwing. They're simply quietly waiting to give you a degree and say goodbye forever. Ah, if you only spent as much time on your Latin as you have in groping about for tragedy..but you did, you did. And I shouldn't complain. See how old I am, and it's taken me this long to learn at last that not even I am worthy of tragedy...of the heroes. The boy on the floor will absorb tragedy with his food and air and not even know its name. He's the closest to a hero. Did I, after all, run with you? Look," he said, and reached for something in his pocket. He held the steak knife high in the air, so that Margaret's mirror flashed the signal on it. He watched the knife at the end of his arm, and twisted it, so that it sent out more and more of the code to bounce against the wall. "I want to kill my rival with this knife," he said. "While he has nothing but a lavender bath mat for a shield, before he covers himself with even more honor and has earned something brazen bronze,

beaten gold. Then I would truly crawl with envy. Now I can just bear it enough to stand upright." He held the knife out toward Ellen. "Here, you do it. It's the duty of the captured race to rise up and slay their master. You won't? But I can't. You proved last night that you wouldn't stand slavery, and I can love my slavery. Did just a little blood kill your appetite for freedom?"

"Je ne comprends pas," said Margaret into her mirror.

"Look at him," said Pathways, flourishing the knife, flourishing signals about the room. "He lies there like a dog, drunk, snoring, as any master does. Won't you do it?" He sighed; Margaret sighed, clouding her mirror. He opened a door, and threw the knife into a corner of the narrow closet among some rusting hangers, to rust.

"Here," he said, "put on my raincoat; although I'm a man, it should fit you, I'm so small, and step downstairs with us into my miraculous all-black Morris Minor. The play's over. I'm surprised you're still in costume. Look at Margaret, all shining, clean, her golden hair brushed like satin, in her darling little...what is it Margaret, voile?"

"Je ne comprends pas," said Margaret into the clouded mirror. "Dotted swiss," she added.

Mr. Pathways chuckled and rubbed his dry hands together. "Dotted swiss," he said. They began to go down the narrow corridor of the rooming house, without a last look at

Soldier Boy. Surprisingly, it was Margaret who needed support, and Ellen and Mr. Pathways struggled to balance her between them by her elbows and keep the necessary mirror before her mouth.

"By the way," said Mr. Pathways, just as he was opening the street door to the brilliant first of June outside, "you owe no one any gratitude. There's no debt to pay. Margaret and I have paid your debt, haven't we, Margaret?"

"Je ne comprends pas," said Margaret into her mirror.

Literally, Sanctissima was in the middle of the night. She travelled through it, and it beat at her from the bottom and compressed her from the top and sides. The jet plane, as she had known it would, truly wooshed. She faced the night from the thick glass of her porthole and tried arranging her mind around the stars beyond it. The attempt made her shoulder throb with firmer pain. The wound's heat rose and baked her face, but the rest of her shivered in the air-conditioned monstrosity that carried her through the middle of the night. She missed the knife; if she could replace it, the hole in her shoulder would be filled; her body would reknit itself around the steel. She turned her thought back onto her pain. This lessened the pain and

protected her from the beams of terror the stars turned against her. She despised the mysterious and the spacious. The universe at night was hell's essence; it loomed, biding time to suck you up to float incessantly through the stars' swill that was space. Sanctissima wondered at those portraits of saints who prayed with uplifted eyes.

A knee, taut in nylon and female cushioning, touched hers.

"Excuse me." The knee withdrew. Sanctissima took her vodka from the little tray. The plane stroked through the middle of the night so easily that the ice in the glass did not move until Sanctissima stirred it. She held the glass up and looked at the face of the stewardess, which was blank and pretty and drawn up by some official face-maker. Especially in pain, Sanctissima could not relax her standards. The face did not appeal. Sanctissima bent forward over the aisle as the stewardess moved to the rear of the plane. The ankle, she saw, did appeal; it turned and wavered above the shoe as a flower, occasionally, rarely, did when it pressed into a breeze in exactly the right direction. Sanctissima's neck stretched farther around her seat, out longer into the aisle. There was chit-chat going on about fun in New York above the ankle; no "excuse mes" there. Sanctissima's neck was becoming a lengthy white serpent; her tongue flickered out and felt the distance between

it and the pleasure of coiling around the neat package of bone, skin and nylon and the feel of lingering to taste the pores. The plane dipped. Sanctissima pressed herself hard into the back of her seat. She fumbled in her briefcase, drew out her album of Bach Inventions and began to beat her fingers against the page in a silent performance, casting Bach's spell against the erotic. Her father had often told her that nothing drowned a thirst for flesh so surely as a Bach Invention. Now, as before, she harkened to his words; but, as often before, she found reason to doubt him. She thundered on, however. The music thrust aside the ankle; the ankle thrust aside the music. Her fingers stumbled; she made mistakes that slammed her teeth into a clench and made her bowels twist. Before long she recognized the flaxen voice weaving around the black, definite notes and pushing her fingers aside. It sang Chi vuol la Zingarella, the one thing it sang to perfection; and the voice's pointed, far-reaching bosom compressed the perfect bellows, rose and fell in Sanctissima's cupped palms until her fingers splayed against the Bach, her teeth unclenched because they vibrated to mistakes no longer.

Sanctissima slammed the album shut, smashing the bosom, song, voice and black notes to one piece and hid it again in the briefcase. She lifted her drink; the ankle would not come back until she wanted more. She opened the

lavender covers of Pathways' farewell gift, The Poems of Renee Vivien. What a silly man, this man Pathways! To give her this sapphic yearning version of the universe for old skirt-twirling Sanctissima! French, of course. There is nothing, Sanctissima noticed, like the French for shut tight windows, a lack of briskness, a tendency to moon. Pathways with his interminable need to identify with literature! Then why, after knowing her for fifteen years, did he not present her with the war diaries of General MacArthur? How excellent would be the feel of khaki after all this music. Isn't there trouble enough in the world, thought Sanctissima, draining her vodka, without the poems of Renee Vivien? But it was inside Renee Vivien where, she noticed, she had stashed the letter, long-lost lamb now found in the middle of the night, in the middle of the universe. A letter? She unfolded the single piece of pale blue paper, with its ten lines of purple scrawl:

Darling Janetissima!

Written from the peak of Parnassus! Written from the Verge of Fame and Glory! To you, darling J-ima, who believed! Who comforted me with cappe-cino and croissants--or was it brioche?--in far off Ann Arbor when all others fiddled with selfish interests in bassoons and the import of Igor Stravinsky! Did you love me? Or is this some devil-sent

gilded dream wrought only to torment my sleepless nights? Sanctissima, come to me! Play for me--it's only you who can genuinely accompany a genuine singer's voice! My throat shall vibrate for you, Sweet Sanctissima! I shall vibrate for you, Sweetest Sanctissima! Drop everything, whoever she is, and fly to me--twenty years are but the beat of a swallow's heart--you will find me as beautiful as ever! The Steinway--O, how silently--gleams beneath its Spanish shawl--I languish against it. Listen, Dearest Heart Sanctissima--Chi vuol La Zingarella!

Tendressement--

Gloiryeux (formerly Maureen)

Sanctissima again inserted the note into Renee Vivien. She must remember to remove the letter and replace it with her checkbook before she presented the book to Maureen (no, Gloiryeux, sweet crucified God!) Maureen-Gloiryeux, Sanctissima was remembering with delight, was ever so depraved--except, of course, for her voice--and the great thing about the depraved was that they stayed depraved. They were dependable--no sudden, overnight yearnings for camping trips in the woods, no sudden advances into maturity and responsibility that drove the steady people of the world to drink. She would indeed enjoy Pathways' gift; she would never mention Sanctissima's modification of it, only cover Sanctissima

with unexpected kisses.

Sanctissima, she told herself, you're no fool; and ordered more vodka as the plane began its descent.

"Now cuddle me," said Pathways.

Margaret tightened one arm around Pathways' neck and reached her other across his little paunch. Pathways tucked his bare heels into the sofa cushions beside him and inhaled in an attempt to reduce his paunch and increase the squeeze of the cuddle. Margaret put her head on his shoulder, but he made her lift it so that he could put his head beneath her chin, which was more the thing. In the dark room, their bodies were naked and seemed to be pale reflections of real flesh. The television set was pointed at them, bathing them in a pale blue glow that made them resemble frozen corpses in the snow. Their hands stroked each other with flat palms, as though one animal were petting another. Their faces, blank and unaroused by the hands, stared at the moving picture before them. A tiny woman, about the size of Pathways' foot, if he held it against the screen, danced before them wrapped from bosom to toe in a silver sequin dress that flashed a coded gibberish to the viewers. She sang, in a loud, happy voice, "Come to Me My Melancholy Baby."

Margaret unstuck her hand from the paunch. She waved it at the tiny woman.

"Is this necessary?" she asked timidly. The truth of these matters was difficult to come by. Hours earlier, Pathways had told her that women under thirty, to achieve orgasm, had to hold a teacup in their teeth during intercourse. Pathways had been astonished (he was becoming less so) at the success of this method. He was still delighted, although rather saddened at the damage to his last remaining piece of Limoges: the handle on the cup had naturally snapped off in Margaret's mouth. She had not seemed at all surprised by the idea. He might hope for even greater things before morning; and he had no wish to drink his tea from soup bowls. He began to search himself for any fantasies or desires it might be pleasant to express with Margaret--sodomy, of course, but he hoped to save this, since it was so much in the great classical tradition, for some obvious and appropriate moment of overwhelming beauty--perhaps after he had confessed that he too had been a virgin until the night of the Trojan Women performance.

"Oh very necessary," he answered solemnly. Perhaps it was. He didn't know. The song was over. He plunged the button of the television's remote control. A young woman with blond hair similar to Margaret's was being systematically beaten by a man smoking a cigar. The young woman wore

spotless white boots that kicked out ineffectually. The man seemed to want the young woman to be still so that he could burn her lovely face with the tip of his cigar. There was that, of course. Mr. Pathways had a collection of small snapshots (of men and women and men and men and women and women), some of which featured a few such sadistic refinements in connection with the sexual act. During his pre-shower morning ritual seated on the floor of his coat closet, Pathways had occasionally wondered if there could be enormous pleasure in stringing a girl up by her wrists in a doorway and beating her black and blue with a cowboy belt (as a man in one of the pictures did). He snuggled closer to Margaret and decided that the thing would be more exhausting than anything else.

"Oh I shouldn't have let her go like that," said Margaret. She was not watching the screen, and she had suddenly become less comfortable. "I know mother and daddy were upset because they couldn't take me home. It was cruel to let Ellen be without me at that funeral this afternoon. O, everything is shattered!"

Pathways held her arm close against him.

"You silly," he said. "Your parents were absolutely delighted for you to stay and begin graduate work in the classics with me this summer. And I've explained about Ellen --how many times do I have to do it? She's beyond me and you.

You'll never touch her again. She's one who's shed blood and passion. That funeral will be like eating ice cream off a plate for her. Blue-haired, golden-eyed Margaret! You upside-down rendition of flesh--incarnation of a mirror-image--upside-down, inside-out--that's all girls are! A man's old coat turned at the collar, re-woven in the tail--and all the buttons missing, women! Blast your petticoats! Touching just one of you, and all my suspicions are confirmed--old Pathways is nothing but a girl's furbelow--and very less a nothing than my old friend, that old bawd who fancies herself a Regency rake, Sanctissima---working hand-in-glove with that sun-faced powerhouse, that Soldier-Boy who's taught me so late in life a hero's definition--a blind, involuntary actor who memorized Virtue's script at birth--and the play's life-long--when he hears the bell ring at intermission it's only us, the audience taking a piss in the aisle! Unh! And I thought all these years it was I those Greek brutes were awaiting in the shadows..."

Margaret placed a cushion between her arm and Mr. Pathways' paunch. She was terrified. Pathways with every word, was shuffling her set reverence for history, the rigid, painted days twenty-one years long that expressed nearly nothing but love for Ellen--he was shuffling them all into a dirty deal of catastrophe. What a snarl he made of simplicity. She would curse the man and leave him were it not that

this country where he had taken her, this wet, bloody country of games all day and night, games with a heavy pulse, was the best place to wait for Ellen, to become more like her. Ellen no longer wished to accomplish friendship, so Margaret would learn the distinguished feelings of the body, aping Ellen's every breath, gulp, twitch until, when they finally met again, Ellen would know without a doubt that they were one and the same again. It was right that she have Ellen.

"Would you like me to read some Homer to you? Don't upset yourself," said Margaret.

"What's the point of Homer anymore, dear pet? It seems I've had the wrong instruction for years. Oh, Sanctissima, go on! Glory hallelujah to you! When you get to this one, lock her in a little box and keep her as a reliquary like the foreskin of Christ--keep her pinned in your pocket with thighs taped shut if she doesn't learn to amuse you! The buxom lieder singer with hair out of a bottle to tease Sanctissima's nostalgia, to give her back the bed-time story--Sanctissima, the sleeping prince bound in a century of ivy awaiting the kiss that'll come wrapped in an echo of 'voi che sapete'--there's one song she'll never hear again from the foot of the bed! But a dream--and an end to a century of dream--is got most satisfactorily for money. There's no other way, in fact. But the singer had better watch her song--it's a mean piano Sanctissima plays, and she can sing

a snatch with the best of them. Ah, you look down and drip tears on your belly--you think I'm betraying the conversation. But it's Ellen I'm talking about to you. Look in my mouth and see Ellen coming out while Sanctissima, in her honest trousers and Inverness, gets into bed and sells herself for a song. You're pretty as all the blooming roses of the Aegean, but you've the soul of a department store with Ellen on all your counters and racks at half-price. But when the customers that mob you for your wares tear off the string and bend to kiss their bargain, their lips barge against empty air. You'd better take your money and run! Stop dusting and arranging that phantom you expect to make you rich, and run to me! When they rush to lynch you, you'll see at once where you belong. Your home's with me and the likes of me."

"I expect it's more brandy you want," said Margaret bitterly, for she saw that she could never expect understanding.

"And while you're at it, pour some on your own snuffling. There's more to come. I've just thought of something."

Pathways held the bottle against Margaret's mouth and forced her, his hand rammed against the yellow silk that blotted out her skull, to drink more than she wished. Pathways swallowed even more and, pressing with his thumb, annihilated the victorious young woman in the white boots, and put them in total darkness. He found his mouth with the rim

of the bottle and drank more.

"Here's to thee, Sanctissima, with the greatest wish I can send you--that the blithe spirit, Lucifer, could choose tonight to get the gate and grab you from the air on his way down to that sweeter Hell than the one you're flying to--you're never more of an angel than when you're in the arms of the devil--old Janet, you could carry him yourself, astride your broad shoulders, to an eternal damnation with no doubts about it, could sitteth at the left hand with desire ground beneath your heel like a roach. Think of it, Sanctissima! No more hot nights of dozens of Bach Inventions. And you can thank your friend Pathways. I know I should have packed you a bomb instead of a book--you could land on Hell with a dowry of burning flesh that would make Satan flush with so much red gratitude he'd wear white and be your simpering bride through the ages--he'd supply you with so much Jean-Marie Farina, 'the cologne of Napoleon' that you'd stink to high heaven with enough conquests and horsebacks and blessed riding crops to quench even your enormous need."

"Why do you care so much about Sanctissima, that old fool? She's gone forever. Ellen might just as well have killed her."

Pathways forced more brandy down her throat.

"I could laugh like a maniac for the rest of my life over that. I'm the fool to explain the ways of cowards as

opposed to the ways of heroes to a blooming patch of roses! You act on roses, not talk to them. The time for action is now."

He set the bottle carefully down in the dark and moved into it, his pale, frail flesh making the furniture clamber.

Later, he called to Margaret to turn on his goose-necked study lamp and to twist the neck until it pointed at his bedroom door. He stood before her in the glare. On the top of a thick auburn wig that was carefully trained in ringlets to his shoulders, he wore the rough sunbonnet of a countrywoman. He had eased the effect of the cornfield by wrapping many broad ribbons of pink grosgrain about it and tying them beneath his chin which was beginning to sprout with whiskers. His padded brassiere was of blue lace; and the panties that matched it had one word stitched above the groin, "Monday."

"Now turn off the lamp," he sobbed, undulating his hips at her and causing the flabby paunch to shake. "Come and undress me gently, as a loving mother would her only son. Lay me carefully on my back and sing softly in my ear "When at night I go to sleep fourteen angels watch do keep." Say I'm your bad bad boy, but mommy loves you best of all and when you put your breast in my mouth, say 'have the tittie, have the nice tittie, poor sweet darling, it's all right now, you don't have to run from the mean boys and chase the ball,

your mommy's here' And O, don't stop saying it!"

Mr. Pathways fell to the floor and lay shaking and crying there before Margaret could move a step to bed him gently on the rug. Before the sun rose, his bonnet was torn quite to shreds and her face was drenched with his tears.

Cold as twelve full fathoms deep in the room with the white shades pulled to the sills and the heavy window curtains (with their message of unfurled peacocks, partridges and purple grapes as big as the birds' bodies repeated systematically up and down the muslin until the lesson was dinned unforgettably into the brain) clasped together against the light, which entered in surreptitious slits beneath the heavy front door to strike an uplifted shoe sole and to cause the dust to dance on the thin-slatted floor, cold from the whining air-conditioner turned up to a new pitch of cold every few moments to preserve what flesh was left in the house, to annihilate the memory of the entrance to the room: June's lambent second day with its birds fat as cherubim, its grass collective growth as polished and anonymous as an army of new-forged breastplates converging and still above the hapless enemy head below.

All summer nature, but shucked stillborn from its living husks and limned in dark lines of cotton thread, close-

stitched embroidery and raised patterns of upholstery, was in the room: flowers with abundant circus colors were woven in rings the size of schoolgirls' hoops across the rug; inside each one, a true-lover's-knot. China plates painted with Magnolias and lilies-of-the-valley chattered on hooks against the wall (pale green like new buds) from the cold. The what-not in one corner began on its topmost shelf with a single sanguine robin and descended to its broadest bottom shelf where carved ivory biddies, canary-yellow, were breaking out of dark gray eggshells. To keep it clean, the fireplace had never had a fire to show; for twenty-three years it had roasted only a brass bucket of dried hydrangeas whose old dragging heads had been propped up for half the twenty-three years with a handful of peacock tailfeathers with purple, iridescent eyes that collected the rooms images and shunted them up like smoke through the decent white of the chimney's bricks. Violets, the Tree-of-Life, Marigolds, humming-birds, a cat with a mouse beneath its paw, all long weather-beaten by the swift flux in the family's seasons had been plied in chain-stitch and cross-stitch and French knots across linen cushions and all piled helter-skelter on top of each other in the sofa's corner until the casual glimpse could catch only the grinning mouse mouth and the finery of the cat's paw. Half a dozen squirrels painted gold climbed a golden tree stump, forever on their way to hide their silver nuts

within it. The stump grew out of the little white mantel above the fireplace, and around it, swamping it in a glass forest, were twenty-three glass paperweights, all shimmering with mille-fiori, one for each year of the postman's marriage to May-Ellen. Above the mantel, and tilted to make forty-six paperweights, was a very wide mirror and so tall that it reached to the ceiling. Its frame was baroque and gilt; and at its top and center with their curls barely missing the ceiling, sat two fat cupids with crossed little ankles reflected in the glass and with cheeks so round from simpering they resembled tiny golden buttocks.

May-Ellen lay on the couch sobbing into the embroidery; and the cupids smiled at her and the women standing around her were wringing their hands. Occasionally, rhythmically, May-Ellen lifted her face out of the embroidery and screamed. It was a scream that started with a broken guttural humming from her throat and advanced into something higher-pitched that closed in on fear and danger like a police car siren. When the scream was over, she began to lower her face again into the pillows, saying in a voice that seemed to be jerked out of her chest, "Ro-Ger--Ro-Ger--Ro--Ger!" When she was fully back in the darkness of the threads that made the cat and mouse and flowers, the sobbing, which was so much more bearable than the scream, recommenced. Then (Ellen noticed from the doorway where the sun burst so

heavily against her back that the front of her was as dark as the grim reaper himself, that dark matching so much the spirit of the room that none of the women in it had yet noticed her)--Then, the women bent over shaking May-Ellen with motions so smooth and accustomed they seemed to have been at them for hours, maybe days or years: the arm of the eldest woman went straight around May-Ellen's shoulder, and the hand of a younger woman smoothed May-Ellen's hair. Neither jostled the other in their specialized tasks. The other three stood next to May-Ellen's feet (both clamped rigidly, Ellen could see, into brand-new white satin mules) and held each other's hands and said, nearly together, "Lowad God, Lowad God, Lowad God, honey you've got to stop." Ellen stood still between the screen door and the heavy front door of the house. She felt her back begin to blister from the heat against it and her face begin to sprout frost from the room's cold; but still she did not move. Still, none of the women recognized a change in the room's climate: Ellen was letting in the heat.

Something growled at her. Opposite the door, in front of the baby grand whose top was closed and loaded with vases of florist flowers, was Swee'pea, Roger's black and white fox terrier. The old dog, with his black spots sifted with gray hairs, was sunk deep into a goose-feather bed pillow. His big protruding eyes must have been going blind be-

cause he was growling at Ellen; or, perhaps, what the front of her represented, the Grim Reaper. One of the goosefeathers clung to his whiskers, but it did not seem to annoy him. He growled again, so deeply it made his loose old hide tremble. He was looking straight at her.

Ellen backed out into the heat, shutting the doors behind her. Any noise she made was caught up in the whine of the air-conditioner and the huge grunting from May-Ellen's throat that was preceding another scream. She stopped long enough to take off her shoes and drop them in the shrubbery beside the front porch. She listened: from inside the big screened porch on the side of the house and through the thick oily leaves of the camellia trees that shaded it, came the sound of too many voices--the good and proper voices of decent Southern women. On their breaths came the smell of ice tea, thick with lemon and sugar. Ellen's feet took the gravel driveway on the other side of the house, nearly running, her intentions made plain to herself: she was going out back and climb the big willow tree there, and sit there and not move until her place and part in all of this was made clear to her. From their upstairs' window, Margaret's parents leaned out and whispered, "Ellen! Ellen!", but she hung her head down, would not hear, and hit the gravel hard enough to hurt.

Up among the willow leaves, Ellen found herself too

big to straddle the big forked branch any longer. She squirmed a while and finally drew her feet up and squatted on it, her knees level with her chest. She leaned her back and elbows against a smaller branch behind her; when she relaxed, she was very comfortable and she reminded herself of the stuffed relic of some extinct bird race in the museum of the willow tree. She wondered for a moment about her father and if his fellow postmen had come and reverently gathered his pieces and fitted them together again in a box where they could all see him whole once more. The tree shook around her and against her during that moment; then she wondered no more, but began to count the pale green slivers of the willow's leaves. She became aware of things that she had forgotten about the tree: she had not been in it for four years. She had counted forty-two leaves in a space the size of half her hand, and the tree was as tall as her house which had two stories and an attic; it was half as wide, counting the big side porch where whispers and ice cubes rustled. Its tan bark gnawed against the soft wrinkled flesh of her instep, and she answered it by rubbing her foot back against it. Take a book you like, she thought. This tree is the same feeling as getting well into a book you like a lot at the start and know you'll like more and more as it goes along. And it's a very long book--you can count on its thickness to keep you happy any time you care for happiness. The main

trunk of the tree, which soared up through her crooked arms, was thicker and deeper than any book. It slimmed and ended an endless distance in the sky, where the snake-colored leaves, as thick and fine as hair, began their long rain to the ground. Hunkering in the willow tree, as yet undiscovered except by trembling old Swee'pea; and still unexpected by the comings and goings of death: Ellen's mind roosted at home, languished from the long trip back from education and lovemaking. There, beginning to feel again the lowering weight of her history and her family upon her head, she did not even bother to wonder why she had ever wanted education and lovemaking in the first place. Possible Creek Cemetary was not so far away that the monstrous length of her kin's graves, guarded by the eroding stone wings of angels, could not make her careless of walks across any ground--even the lawn beneath the willow tree, that was as green and flat as a billiard table--Any ground might be hallowed ground: the weight of one foot on a family grave, and it would burst like a gas-filled balloon and there you would be, wrapped in the bones of your great-aunt's arms. Without knowing it, she resolved to stay in the tree with feet far off the earth until her father was planted safely with his wife's ancestors. The graves were out of sight, but the house was plain to see: soused in sunlight and heat, it crouched among its vegetation--green and flowers begun by the hands gone to dust

beneath Possible Creek. Now that Roger's gone, there's not a single man left in the house. The bugs hummed in the willow's hair, around about Ellen's hair. When there's no more of a family left to be born, its women begin to live forever. Another loud laugh from the side porch, and a hasty crack of fresh ice from the tray to cover it up. "Miss Nina," said a voice that rose up slowly to beat the heat, to keep the powder on the bosom still and dry, "Miss Nina, use this fan of mine and calm yourself. I do declare you'd laugh at anything, Miss Nina!" The postman dies and leaves a gap as wide as a canyon, and six feet deep. How many females do you need to move in and fill the space so the wind won't whistle in the corners, so the dust won't collect on that side of the bed? Ellen's mind, up a tree, filled with the problem, was sinking to a drowse and a good idea of herself as a mean, booted giant in tight leather trousers, with ways as common as clay. Here's me banging on the front door so hard the china squirrels break on the hearth; here's me spitting in the peacock tails and, if I miss, on the carpet. I <u>disdain</u> to lift that toilet seat! Where's my supper! I want it fried in grease! Bang goes my warty fist, and great-grandmother's china (Miss Harriet Love!) jumps a mile and disrupts your permanent waves! Quit swishing your skirts and pawing your cameos: Come scratch my crotch--my hands are busy with this joint of beef! And when I finish I'll throw it at your

heads! All you women run to bed--now I go to get drunk and smoke black cigars, curse and swear, have my hounds in, fornicate with purple satin women, scratch up the furniture, deal the cards, rattle the dice, piss on the preacher's backside and take the name of the Lord in vain! When dawn comes up you'll find me puking in the rose beds!

Ellen's head drooped. She stayed in the tree by the same instinct had by the body of a sleeping bird. Well, gentle Roger, your letters are scattered god knows where, your stiff smoky-blue uniforms gone North to the government; well-gentle Roger, meek and mild, you don't watch out they'll bury you in a skirt made from a feed-sack, ribbons and pearls tacked front and back... well, gentle Roger... Well, he said, hefting her up into his arms as though she were an organdy-ruffled mailbag full of letters, "it is one thing for your mama to have the sweetness to let me bring you way out here, but it will be another if you get back home with chicken doo on your patent leathers." So she rode, as easily as a bag of letters, six years old and her big sash fluttering behind, from the running board of Miss Nina's Buick, across a yard as gray and firm as concrete and stamped all over with the witless three-pronged messages left by chicken feet. Nothing grew out of that dust but signs of chickens and a chinaberry tree, old and thick as night. She rode on Roger's arm, so close to his face that the wrinkles of joy that were shedding

from the corners of his eyes and mouth as they approached the huge tree (there was a house behind that tree, so tiny it was almost lost in the shade) became her joy, too, though her heart did not feel the reason for the joy, nor did her mind understand it. Through the treetop, there was a flash of silver that made her eyes blind with light and made her think a patch of Heaven's pavement had been revealed way out here in this stretch of nowhere. Nothing more to see on that trip across the yard but the flash of the tin roof that took the summer morning, broiled it, then tossed it back up to fry the sky a deeper blue. But out of the corner of her eye glimmering with the flat reflection of Roger's joy: a small patch of tobacco leaves getting cropped by two fat women, one white, one black. Their faces, flecked with bits of sun that got through the brims of their straw hats, lifted and looked for one short impassive moment at the pristine thing in Roger's arms; then they turned down again to the leaves. And a rusty Royal Crown Cola sign that had been tacked down on the third step to the porch of the house to keep the visitors from falling through the thin old wood. "This is my grandma who raised me up from nothing when my own mama had me then left to go to God." That tiny creature, so tiny inside all her wrinkles, crouched inside her starched dress, and trembled a little in the heat or from the sight of something. All those wrinkles were stained from eighty

summers' worth of sun; and when Roger told her to bend down and kiss that cheek, it was like rubbing her face against an old Christmas walnut the size of a fist. Then the thickest wrinkle--it was her mouth--opened up and commenced laughing with a sound that was more like some bad little boy tuning up to cry. Hunnnh hunnnh hunnnh! went the noise. The noise pushed thin streams of tobacco juice down her chin. The brown juice hastened to blot the starched bosom, but Roger caught it with his handkerchief. The laughing did not stop, but gathered like a wind that was rising to shake the flesh out of the stiff dress. Ellen remembered the story of a cyclone, and grasped her daddy suddenly by the wrist. When this old woman shook harder and harder and at last carried them through the clouds in a black tailspin, it was Roger's wrist that might save her. So much laughing might kill them all. Hunnh hunnh hunnh! it went on. The chair beneath it rocked violently. Ellen listened for the rattle of a silver roof. Roger took his wrist away. "She's just laughing because she's so proud to see my dearest. She's just laughing because she ain't had a thing to laugh at in her whole life." Roger's face became bewildered by his own remark. "Stay here," he said, "and--and--tell her you love her! Then we'll go." The RC sign called out beneath his weight. She watched him stand at the edge of the tobacco patch and take money out of his wallet. The white woman

took it slowly, sadly, and tucked it away in her dress bosom. Then Roger put his hand on the woman's arm and they stood talking, their faces bent to the gray dust between them. Although he had patted her on the hand and said "I'll be right back," the old woman, when she couldn't see Roger any more, had stopped her laughing. She shrunk back into her trembling, the only thing, as far as the eye could see, that moved at all through that blaze of airless day. Ellen's foot struck the thickness of a red geranium plant potted in an old Maxwell House can. The sound ran a chill across her brain, but the old woman did not look up or stop her shaking. To see into the dark house inside she had to cup her hands around her face; and all the while, the red blossom in the coffee can felt against her leg like a cat's muzzle nosing there. A greasy smell of collards simmering with a piece of ham: it was the smell that clung to colored people, the smell that Ludie brought with her to the kitchen at home every morning. The dark inside took shape beneath the smell, first the white of the bed with its little impression of the old woman against the sheets; the small round white of the chamber pot against the head of the bed; a deeper dark, a carved and more cumbersome dark than the room's shadows, was a parlor organ with foot pedals worn some time long ago nearly to splinters from the heavy pressure of hymns. Above the organ, his face yellowing and brown-spotted, Jesus Preaching to the

Elders, in a frame--a reminder to the musician as to the nature of music. A slant of light came through the window and struck the wall above the organ. There was another frame, round and deep behind the glass to make a shadow-box: a hank of hair, so thick and long and black that spread out it might have reached from Ellen's shoulders to her feet, was twisted with flowers faded to tissue white and woven to make a wreath there. In capital letters, curved to fit the frame's circumference, and plain as the Three Bears, were words that said, "DAUGHTER AND MOTHER REST IN JESUS." Ellen pressed her face deeper into the lax old screen that made the summer door. A wad of cotton tied there to ward off the flies leaned against her cheek with the same light touch of the geranium blossom. She needed to open the door and pull the organ stool against the wall, needed to climb up and press her face on to the dusty glass that protected the shadow-box and look deep into the strands of the hair. What old flowers, what an old room, what an old boy Jesus; and what young black hair was woven into the old things! A moment in the fresh outdoors, waving in Ellen's hand through the air, and it would be hair so young it could skip and scamper! Her fingers moved to the thread spool that made the door handle, and grasped it. A claw grabbed her by the arm and pulled! Fingernails dug deep enough to stroke her wristbone! "Daddy! Daddy!" screamed Ellen, and Roger was

running back from the tobacco patch. Not fast enough. The old woman held on though Ellen squirmed and danced enough at the end of her arm to shake the dead alive, though the old woman's shaking and that of her dress and that of her cane rocker grew so violent it might have made her, alive as she was, go dead, jostle her wrinkled heart to a stop. But the old woman held on. Though her eyes said she knew it, she knew this jumping white thing with the flying black hair might shake her so much she might never rock and tremble another day. All in the rich shade of the chinaberry tree. Roger flying through the brilliant light, scuffing through chicken scratches, nearly tripping on alarmed hens. The black woman and the white woman rubbing their hands slowly down the fronts of their dresses, otherwise still as stone at the tobacco's green edge. Never to twirl on tiptoe and shake the black hair from her hand! No, never--the old woman's got Ellen! Roger, stuttering "nononono," bent over between them, had his hand with theirs, made it a battle of three hands. But it was not Roger who opened the claw, or Ellen who pulled free: it was the old woman who let go that ended it. Freed like that, Ellen fell back; again she heard the thud of her shoe on the flowering coffee can. Roger could not simply kneel, he had nearly to bend double to put his head down in the starched lap; and, to wrap his arms around the old woman, he had also to encircle the back of

her rocking chair. The old woman's shaking included Roger. A sound not a laugh, but a word, a name, was choking in her mouth's tobacco juice. It came out "Do-the, Do-the" above Roger's head; then loudly, plainly enough for anyone, she spoke, "Dorothea! Dorothea!" and the juice dribbled to Roger's head that had no handkerchief to protect it. The old eyes swiveled wildly in the walnut face and would not leave sight of Ellen; the claw reached out again and began to grasp, vainly. Touching nothing of the girl, it pushed angrily and hard with all its strength against Roger. Feeling it, finally, he stood up before them; in the rich shade of the chinaberry tree, his misery was stripping him to pieces in their full view. His misery branched through Ellen like a tree, and her heart was like some rotten fruit hanging on that tree. He took the old woman's face in one hand: he could have cracked it in his fist, but he said to it, "That's not her. Dorothea's dead and she's buried yonder in the grove. This one's mine, my baby, my dearest. Sometimes I've sat and brushed her black hair. Many times. She is not your little daughter; she is your <u>great</u>-grandchild. She is such a long time away from you, Ma'am!" Comprehension took the old woman's face. Ellen moved close to see it there. It took the old woman no time to gather the juice around her gums; and though she aimed at Ellen's face, she seemed satisfied to have hit the stiff white waist where the organdy was

gathered to make the skirt. The tobacco spit struck and burned like a thunderbolt. But in an instant it had spread through the cloth to the size of a hand, and there it lay, pressing warm like a hand against her belly: someone should say, Is this where it hurts? Ellen could not scream, because the old woman beat her to it and her shaking was enough to rattle the bones. It was a scream intended to wake the dead, but it did not.

The white woman, though she was big and fat and had to run all the way across the yard and around the tree, got the old woman up and cradled in her arms before Roger could move. So it was Ellen that Roger hefted against his shoulder where it was, at last, safe to begin her crying. The woman caught up with them at the door to Miss Nina's Buick, carrying her hat in her hand, as a man would. She pressed the coffee can of geraniums against Ellen's hands, would not listen to No. Ellen pressed her face into the hairy stink of the flowers and sealed her lips against Thank you.

Nearly home, Roger said, "She thought I had brought my mama, Dorothea, back to her. It's your hair, black as can be, that made her laugh and want you. I love her and loved her and stayed with her until the day I got your mother, but she never loved me back because she loved Dorothea and she was dead. I can't hate her for loving my own mother so much, can I? Did you tell her you loved her, like I told you

to? I don't know. It is a funny thing because she's a colored woman, but sometimes Ludie strikes me so much like her, or the way she used to be. Well you know Ludie, and that's the way my grandmama used to be." And then they were home.

"You better get down out of that tree. Mama says you ought to be ashamed of yourself perched in a tree and you know what's happened. I can see up your dress."

"Kiss my foot, beige nigger."

"The time for that kind of talk is over. I am sixteen now and on the verge of the N double-ACP. I am the first colored person that got in the white high school. Next year I am going to be a cheerleader, a drum majorette, president of the Latin Club, Queen of the Junior-Senior Prom where I will wear pink net over taffeta and valedictorian. You wait and see."

"I'll wait and see what I see." She was going to wait, also to look down and see Venusberg herself. As long as her eyes were closed she could control the heat and bear up to the creeks of sweat that were running the flesh off her bones. Open eyes and a glance below would reveal Venusberg beneath a waterfall of willow limbs, looking cool within the green rush of leaves that could almost be a shower of

water; and Venusberg's brown eye, thick with the intelligence of what she saw, would be staring back up at her. That other eye of Venusberg's, the pale blue eye, the wall-eye, would be cut off to the side as usual, its cool gaze frozen on the future. Venusberg had second sight; or rather, her blue eye, her wall-eye, had second sight. She had never claimed responsibility for what that eye saw. When it made known a vision of the future to her, she wrote it all down in the form of a letter to the person whose future the eye had seen; and then she mailed the letter. The wall-eye's vision was almost always about someone in the family: Ellen's family--Ellen, May-Ellen, the late Roger, Welch and Foster, Miss Nina, sometimes her own mother, Ludie, who was very brown, who was the cook, who was hired by Miss Nina for her daughter to help May-Ellen bear up to being a postman's wife. Ludie and the Mason & Hamlin piano, another wedding present from Miss Nina, had allowed May-Ellen to bear up very well. Venusberg would hand her letter to the person it concerned and say, in a surly way, "take it for what it's worth to you"; and they always did, for Venusberg's blue wall-eye saw nothing but the truth, and the truth was worth agony or pleasure to the person it came to; and then agony or pleasure about a year later when the truth became fact. Venusberg was surly about the bisions her eye saw because none of them was ever about Venusberg; so, since the beginning of her visions on her

twelfth birthday, she had been making up gorgeous stories about herself--stories such as becoming a drum majorette and the valedictorian--and they never ever came true. On Venusberg's twelfth birthday her eye had seen the first sight; and that very afternoon, Ellen had got a letter. It said, "Dear Ellen, Soon you and Margaret will start calling me beige nigger and I see this fact will turn you one day long hence into a bat; so watch out, yours truly, Venusberg." And sure enough, soon Margaret and Ellen took a close look at Venusberg's cream and coffee coloring and began calling her beige nigger, very fondly. Where had Venusberg come from? Ludie never had a husband and was too ugly, despite her pretty rich brown coloring, to have ever had a lover. When Ellen was old enough to understand the origin of babies ("we all start out from between our dear daddies' legs," an older girl had told her in horrified tones, which proved the older girl was not old enough), she took a good hard look at Ludie and then at Venusberg (who was only six then and saw nothing beyond the next meal) and said to May-Ellen, "Where in the world did Venusberg come from?"

"I don't know! Don't ask me!" May-Ellen had answered, rolling her eyes and rushing back upstairs for something she forgot. It was a Sunday and Roger was still at the Men's Bible Class that went on and on; Miss Nina beat him to the house, arriving home with Uncle Welch and Uncle Welch's

beloved, Foster. Foster was Uncle Welch's beloved long before Ellen was even born; he wore a hearing aid disguised as a giant pearl earring in his left ear, and he had a green thumb. That Sunday, as always, the whole family would sit down to a good dinner cooked by Ludie and featuring Beloved's delicious lettuce and vegetables. Foster was the only one, when asked, who did not reply, "I don't know! Don't ask me!" because his earring, as usual, was turned off. He smiled mysteriously to Ellen's question, but he smiled mysteriously at everything. Miss Nina did say, "Well I know, but I'm not telling;" and she didn't, but went on reading Swann's Way while she ate. But she had already read Swann's Way ten times, practically knew it by heart and could concentrate on the question enough to add, when dinner was over, "But I'm the one who named her Venusberg." She marked her place in the book with her finger and got up from the table. She was a tiny woman, and as fragile-looking and elegant as her son Welch. But Welch was really fragile. The rest of the family, a little sturdier, had always maintained that the two of them could get up and pose on the mantelpiece and who could tell the difference. Miss Nina looked down at her plate. She intended to stay tiny: out of the sight butterbeans she had taken, there were four left; and only a neat bite had been removed from the little chicken thigh. And she had drunk her iced tea straight again, without sugar. Above the lacy

dinner table, the mahogany showing through where the bowls and bowls and platters and platters of food did not cover it, Miss Nina threw back her white and lacy head and laughed, as she always did over the naming of Venusberg. Beneath the laughter's sound, there was the shuffle of food and murmers of "oh mama, you didn't eat again;" and "oh Miss Nina, you've got to eat more." But she threw back her head and laughed, the four rings of diamonds on four fingers winking over the steady eaters, the fingers themselves clutching the battered Proust to the precious flat of her bosom. She laughed and said, "I named her Venusberg, yes, indeed I did. For my own private amusement. I am the only member of this family with culture enough to understand the joke. Despite May-Ellen's brilliance at the piano, despite Welch's library of modern French masterpieces in plain brown wrappers, despite my granddaughter's ability to read and write through some triumph over her paternal genes, I and only I am truly cultured enough around here to appreciate a name like Venusberg for Ludie's baby and the only one charming enough to laugh regularly at it!" Her voice grew tender and humble. She placed a hand on Welch's curly black hair. Two tears promptly appeared in her eyes. "But I owe it all to my only son, Welch, don't I, Welch?" she murmured. Welch removed her hand from his head and kissed each ring on her fingers and did not answer. With his other hand, to express his agony, he reached

under the tablecloth and clutched Foster's knee. Foster, with his earring off, misinterpreted the agony coming through Welch's hand and thought Welch wanted to go upstairs. "From the moment my son Welch got his full growth and brought Beloved into my house, I have been a woman of letters. The literacy of that boy! With the greatest aplomb, he eased me through the lesser lights and into Marcel Proust. And here I have stayed for the past five years. Isn't that right, Beloved?" She leaned over and began to stroke Foster's hair. Foster smiled mysteriously and scraped up the last bite of Ludie's fantastic home-made strawberry ice cream. The rest of the family murmured, Bless his heart! and asked Ludie to bring them second helpings.

"Ludie, where did Venusberg come from?"

"This is my nap-time. Go talk to some of your white family. You don't know what a Sunday is around here." Through May-Ellen's cast-off satin slip, with lace at the breasts and lace at the hem, Ludie's body curved out like an assortment of plump fruit, turned brown from the summer heat. There was nothing ugly about Ludie below the shoulders. Her room above the garage was a little hot-box. It had a white iron bed where Ludie lay, a rocking chair where Ellen rocked, a table stacked with old Dream Books and a Bible stuffed with Sunday School pictures and yellow newspaper clippings that told the progress of Ludie's second cousin from the county

jail to the electric chair. He had killed his sixteen-year-old best girl friend with forty-seven knife wounds in a white-hot frenzy of marijuana, the clippings said.

"They're all gone to sleep."

Ludie sighed and sat up on the bed. The two window-shades, beaming yellow, promising further heat outside, flapped, seemed to sigh also. Ludie reached for her Bible, removed the first clipping that told of the discovery of her cousin at his hide-out in a church belfrey, and began to read: "... there were in the same country, Shepherds abiding in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo the Angel of the Lord came upon them and they were sore afraid..."

"Ludie! I asked you a question. Stop reading that. It's not Christmas."

"It makes me feel cooler. It reminds me of how nice and cool it is when they start reading this at church." She shut the Bible and lay back again. "Your daddy's not asleep. I happen to know he's at last back from Bible Class and is at this very moment sitting on the porch eating ham biscuits."

Ludie sighed again; the satin shuddered. "I just wish somebody would fix that eye of hers. All the colored people see her coming with that blue eye shooting off to the side like that and say 'Witch Girl! Witch girl! Ignoramuses! There is none sweeter than my V.B. Nearly seven years ago to

the day..." Ellen stopped rocking and held still. "...here I was like I am now laying in the heat dog-tired from working the stain out of your best white organdy when Lo! I dreamed a dream that a big white angel appeared by my bed shining and stark naked in the raiment of the Lord and this Angel fell upon me and folded me in his wings and lifted me to the glory of Jesus' Heaven like I never felt before and out of the throat of the angel came a multitude of voices singing Glory to God in the Highest and this angel carried me wrapped in his giant wings through the Valley of the Shadow of Death and through the pit of Hell where we wrassled with the Devil and won and then I was uplifted, uplifted so high the pearly gates came before me and I heard the voice of God say This is my daughter Ludie who I am well pleased with and the angels' singing came upon me again and again and then I woke up and I was alone. Except I heard the rustle of my big white angel as his wings beat him through my ceiling and back into Heaven. And nine months later to the day Venusberg was born to me in this very room while Miss Nina held my hand and read to me out of one of her books. This child shall be called Venusberg, Miss Nina said. Her name shall be called Wonderful."

"Praise the Lord!" Ellen whispered.

"Certainly praise the Lord," said Ludie. "My sweetest V.B. came unto me in a way not unlike the infant Jesus

came unto Mary. The Virgin Mary. Now go find your daddy and let me rest, let me rest. Take the poor man a glass of tea." But Ellen did not. She nearly stumbled over little Venusberg who slept in the thick grass beneath her mother's window. Her head rested in the nest of her two thin arms, and with her eyes shut, she could have been any pale little nigger, half angel or not. Ellen went off from the sleeping house to awaken Margaret with a story.

I wish I had gone to find him. I wish I could see him eating ham biscuits on the porch. It wasn't that hot any more. She opened her eyes. Shadows growing stronger by the moment were all over the place; the grass inside them seemed brighter. Venusberg was lying flat on her back in the grass, her arms beneath her head as if no time at all had passed. The brown eye was still on Ellen. There was a soft rip of fingers through butter bean hulls coming from behind the bushes crowding the back door steps. Ludie was thinking of suppertime.

From the grass came the voice: "You better."

"Better what?" Heat, sleep, the past gripped her tongue.

"Come on down. The limousine's coming in an hour.

You have to see him in the funeral chapel before the burial. You got to go. I'm going. Didn't you love him? I loved him. Your mama don't even know you're home. I have a prophecy for you."

Ellen shuddered; the willow leaves rubbed and shuddered. What else was coming true?

"Tell me."

But Venusberg was on her feet, standing in the imprint her body had left on the grass.

"You'll get your letter later." Then she lowered her head and went to the garage.

One deep breath, she thought, and I'll get down, go into the air-conditioned screaming, my mother's grief will wind around me like one of their bedsheets they've used for a week, will stick to my skin, tear it off in shreds, I'll bleed like a stuck pig, run like a chicken with its head cut off, fall like a shot bird, get mashed like a run-over cat. Dirty old woman get your nasty hands off me!

"Granddaughter of mine up a tree! Unclench your teeth, child! Show a little aplomb."

"Grandmama..."

Her hair, white and soft as soap lather, was tied at the nape of her neck with baby-blue ribbon. The skirt of her baby-blue dress, as gathered and huge as a ball gown, hung exactly at her ankles; her waist was so thin it had almost

disappeared. The book she held was thicker than her waist. Her feet were bare, her toenails, carmine.

"Grandmama, how's the Proust?"

"Ah! So you know about that now? So education's taught you something important? We have another woman of culture in the family. But you're still behind me, still behind me."

Miss Nina twirled on her toes, her skirt flew out like a real ball gown, she held her head back with a smile for some partner. It was for Ellen up the tree.

"Proust is all over, there's your answer, grandchild. Except late at night when Foster and Welch and I have finished with the TV and they take turns reading me his letters to his mother. I can't say I take to Marcel's mighty nonsense for his mother--it gives me the hopeless feeling of being overloved." She held up a book for Ellen to see. Its cover was royal blue, stamped with gold. "Now for me it's Madame Recamier--stunning, immortal female, so much like the me you see before you! Do you know what Sante Beuve says about us? He says that Madame Recamier (I mean we) listened avec seduction! Can you imagine? Listening avec seduction! It would mean all my life's glory if I could find someone to listen to me like that--besides Sante Beuve that is. Ah!" She struck her flat chest with her fist. "Ah, but I am doomed henceforth to fawning Welch who loves his mother, to deaf,

deaf, deaf Beloved. A woman like me with a deaf listener! M. de Chateaubriand writes to her, us: 'I must never leave you again. Adieu, adieu. Always adieus: life is made up of them.' Would to God someone would leave me! Never an adieu to my name! No one's gone but the postman.

"Do you know the postman's dead?"

But Ellen was finally down the tree, to leave Miss Nina pacing the grass and whispering to her book. She went past Ludie whose tears were salting the butter beans she shelled into her lap. She went up the back stairs and, dressed for a funeral, came down the front stairs.

Someone had decked May-Ellen out in black, had hung pearls at her throat, but she kept taking her shoes off.

"Honey, stop taking your shoes off. You're going to have to walk any minute."

"I won't," said May-Ellen. "They can't put him in any hole. He wouldn't go in any hole without me being there, and I won't go. I won't walk."

"Oh!" gasped all the women.

Ellen, entering the parlor, joined the female species by adding to its odor: the smell of cotton fresh from beneath the iron; nylon strapped and slithering from shoulder to toes in all its shapes; lipstick like little candy factories on every mouth; powder more pungent than flower pollen. They had put on masks of mourning, grief-costumes, and their

skins had soaked it all up like a picnic feast. They touched May-Ellen with glove-tipped fingers; they turned to one another on heels elevated three inches from the rug. The white kid fingers twinkled on the widow's black. The widow fell forward against each touch and moaned. Each moan displaced another feminine scent: on her breath was a thick masculine boot--her breath was a man's ghost-foot. Her husband was not dead. He was curled in her stomach, he was marching off her tongue to kick the female room apart, then feed on it. The widow had swallowed her husband alive.

Ellen, watching from the stairs, swallowed delusions alive.

Into them, through the room, came the barefoot voice of Miss Nina: "My own daughter acting like any other woman! How can I bear it! She's like a corpse herself and you, you ladies, are vultures descending to dress up her rotting. Anyway, she <u>thinks</u> she's a corpse. She <u>thinks</u> her pretty little body's going to rot! That's all it boils down to when all in deathface, shaking, and can't eat a thing and come on back to me, dear husband, dear husband, come, the widow woman tries to cover up the genuine article--you all know it--not the hole in the ground she fears being filled, but the hole between her legs she fears never's going to be filled--Nevermore! Oh, go on, scream, draw back, shake your hoary locks, your hoary bosoms at me, just a poor old vulgar widow woman

myself--and none of you sees I'm Proust's mother, I'm Madame Recamier, too! What's that at my elbows? Twin blessings of old age--the two dearest sodomites known to God or woman--green-thumbed, pornographic, sensual beyond your wildest dreams, my precious daughter! I've seen them myself tossing off an afternoon on my own bed--why, they've dented every candlewick bedspread I ever owned. And never would I deprive them! Name me another old woman with such blessings at her elbows. Oh for Christ's sake, you little thing--stop that howling! There'll be another mailman who'll bring you a letter every day--I guarantee you one will ring your bell by tomorrow. In the meantime, let's get it over so you can strum some Chopin--this time for your daughter. I think she hankers for women bent to keyboards. In the meantime, if you get a letter meant for me, tear it up; if I hear a song telling secrets about me, trying to dignify me with some music, I'll plug my ears, maybe I'll sneak in and whack off your fingers when you're taking some lonesome sleep some night soon. Just leave me alone! As for me, I intend to <u>drink</u> henceforth--here's the oldest wine in the world at my elbows. Take down your pants, my boys, and show them the cobwebs on your bottles! Welch, Beloved! Pour me a glass! Yes, watch out! Indeed a little bit of common mailman has come into the bloodstream of all of us. There's the one with the biggest dose in the corner, her thoughts elsewhere, on bells of her own to

ring, on a whole city of mailboxes that will know her hand alone. Precious child! She's in her pretty dress and high-heeled shoes: our wild colonial boy. Get her, Beloved; Welch, get your mother's shoes. Let's go bury the mailman. The king is dead; long love the wild colonial boy!"

Well, here I am, thought Ellen from the stairs. I can see through the window what they cannot--that the limousine is here and the funeral director, with his dearest sweet-mush of a face, is buffing his fingernails as he hurries up the walk. Wild colonial boy is what she thinks. I'm wilder than that, wilder than boy or girl, bird or beast, you name it: born in the mud of a throbbing jungle, raised with a cutlass between my teeth, I've come here red-eyed and stinking with the blood of a thousand soft-eyed adversaries. I have a mat of black greasy hair that curls around the shoulders of my coat of many skins; I have a red mustache that curls around my ears and in my ears, gold earrings I ripped from the severed head of Charles I. There're two pistols against my thighs and another in the dark, stuck to my belly. You won't believe it: but beneath this scum and dirt and bristle, my face is as romantic as an empty theatre, but still only a dim reflection of my great romantic brain where the real scenes occur--I'm decorated from head to toe, inside and out, with souvenirs of my march through history. I've collected them here, and there, taking a little something

away each time an event, a person, moved me to tears--regard the earrings. That rust you see is Charles' blood. Even the clothes I wear are delicate with time--this shirt, for instance, that you see only as a soiled rag, once glorified the frantic chest of the Phantom of the Opera. These tight trousers end just below my calves--you know why? Joan of Arc. And the knees are frayed from her praying. Even my heart's not my own. Carved from the chest of Catherine of Russia while she was still warm, it took its first leap back to life in my body. Hence my tainted, ungovernable Romanoff manner. There's more I won't mention, since it's time to bury the mailman; but before I step into your arms, mother, and let your tears wear holes in my eyes--and let me catch them in this silver phial I carry in my pocket--there they'll join Heloise's--notice the sheen of my boots: they were licked this shiny by the tongue of Jesus Christ, in the performance of the first of his many acts of humility. And my shoulders are strong enough for the weight of the mailman's bag. Just let me have it--a new treasure I can use and use again. You'll see; you'll have your letters before your morning coffee's done. The feel of the letters I'll bring you will warm your hands day in, day out. I'm coming!

All the way to the grave, the June day increased its gold. Pots of yellow were being gathered up above then dumped down in bursts of bright heat that made the passing

scenery of town, then of country, the little line of cars floated through, livid, rich. When the mailman was buried, and when all the living mailmen had passed by to touch the family of the dead--each man with the expression of a soldier reluctantly surviving his battle-blown comrade--and when May-Ellen's veil had been lifted for kisses too numerous to tell; when each survivor had tried to penetrate, unsuccessfully, Ellen's huge, nearly black sunglasses with bare, quick looks to see what her eyes could say; when Miss Nina had been forced by Welch and Beloved away from the vicinity of the minister ("I saw," she said. "He took absolute pleasure in mouthing those banalities. His whole little fleshpot of self grew stiff, absolutely, from each little boring penny-phrase: resurrection, life-without-end, Jesus's bosom--I wouldn't bury my jackass beneath such words, much less my daughter's mailman. His pleasure was appalling! You know me--nothing delights me more than a strong, rich abnormality, a first-class perversity--but lord God! That man's bound for hell for exciting himself with mediocre language! I'd rather see a necrophiliac at work any day.")--when they all had regathered at the cars, each like a slab of darkness against the brightness of the day in their somber clothes--all dark but Miss Nina, still floating in her powder blue, so light herself she seemed invisible to many--the bright day disappeared. Many clouds rushed to hang above the cemetery, and they were

gray, all of them. When the cars began to move, the clouds began to soak everything; and the rain beat everybody home.

Ludie, still in her funeral hat of black straw and red roses, worked over supper in the kitchen. She held up a fish head by its dainty, clean spine and dangled it before Miss Nina.

"They brought all these fish from next door. They have to be eaten tonight."

"Excellent," Miss Nina answered. "Ages ago a goddess who shall be nameless shed all her pubic hairs into the sea. That's why fish have so many bones. Cook plenty of cornbread to go with the fish. Choking to death on a pubic hair is unlikely in this house, since Venusberg has not foretold it, but her grief may cause some breakdown in her vision. Be sure they get plenty of cornbread. Where is Venusberg? I've already made the rest of them go to bed. Where is she?"

Miss Nina split open a pomegranate, her only nourishment from morning until supper, and began to lick the seeds into her mouth.

"She's somewhere in the rain, crying," answered Ludie; and she turned to drip more tears into the glaring eyes of the dead fish.

"In that case, we're all accounted for now. I'm off to my own bed." And she twirled across the kitchen tiles, careful as always to step only on the white, never on the

black.

The rain fell; the clouds moved in gargantuan stumbles above the roof. The rain fell, and, with a little wind behind it, made uncertain passes against the window panes. Miss Nina had got them all to their beds behind their doors, but whether they wept or not, even breathed or not, Ellen could not tell. She climbed to the top of the attic stairs, then turned around and went back down. She meant to cover all the house in her bare feet, from top to basement, and collect every sense, every color, every sound, then to stir them, mash them, boil them and hold her face in the mess's steam and hope to breathe in sorrow; to eat it, to become so stuffed with grief, she could vomit grief; to lie doubled with screaming while too much grief ripped out her bowels. But nothing touched her; she collected nothing. Beneath the first door came the sweet numb scent of marijuana and the soft gasps of Welch and Beloved squeezing their lungs tight against it; then the quickening creak of their bed. Behind the next door, Miss Nina whispered the words of some book aloud. Before she put her hand against the knob of the last door, Ellen went to the end of the hall and lay flat down on the cedar chest beneath the window there and watched the rain come. She began to trace her thought through all its animal, vegetable, mineral content. First, Margaret, the soft rabbit reflection of her lion self, mad-as-a-march-hare, being

trundled, like a wheelbarrow, by her ankles through the terrible predicaments of Pathways' passions; Margaret, trembling, the bunny frightened by the dogs, cuddled beneath her heart, and was stupid enough to want a lion's solace and stupid enough to be so clean despite all her sex-mongering; and Sanctissima, a weak reed, with traces of oak in her brain, mahogany in her wrists, the look of an old crow set between her eyes, other old crows perched in the snarling branches of her hair: even now, seeking grief out of rain many feet above the earth, even now, that certain secret look of the aviary, that clustered in, that turned, that bowed, that lowered the Sanctissima head, turned Ellen's belly to stormy water where the good ship Ellen foundered. And something else in her belly--the mindless steel of the Soldier's arrow, on a course due North, set dead center and trembling in the moving Ellen target, made her close her eyes and imagine she withered in her skin, that nothing of her lived except some center in her belly.

Welch, a long time ago, had left the Navy under a cloud. After he was welcomed home, still sweet and alive, thank God, he had unpacked a particular suitcase and brought out red silk robes that snorted and huffed and slithered with the snouts and tails of countless golden dragons. There was one for everybody. In the pocket of each was another thoughtful gift, a silk fan painted with cherry blossoms.

The pocket of Beloved's robe was much heavier than the others --besides the fan, he had received various Oriental honeymoon devices that made him blush with shy gratitude before the family and caused Miss Nina to throw rice at him. Ellen's dragon robe, that used to trail the floor, not hit her at the knees; the sleeves were tight around the elbow. She lay naked beneath it and watched the rain. She moved an arm; and a dragon rode across her breast, and her nipple stood up to meet it. She smiled up and out at the rain, and thought of fire. The fire was licking at the roots of the house, leaping across the dark basement and eating the shelves beneath the jars of jelly, corn, gherkins. In the kitchen, the fire was taking Ludie from behind and making her shout until she crackled and was as crisp as her own cooking. The vases of flowers, the peacock feathers, the perfect pitch of the Mason & Hamlin, all the embroidery threads burned together in the parlor, hummed as they fell. Ellen, cool while her family choked in their beds, opened the door of her new home, the only home henceforth, the home of her self. Childhood burned around her; and mother, father, all the attendant blood that had fashioned the color of her eyes, the texture of her hair, the nature of her games until this moment, went, at her command into the blaze with no more value than carved sticks of walnut. Beneath her eyelids, Ellen set her house on fire. When she opened her eyes, she was grown

and free.

She stood up. The dragon's gold was scarring her skin; it was too tight, too tight. She took Sanctissima, Margaret, the Soldier and her benign future all in her arms and leaped--so slowly it was quite like flying--from the burning building.

"All right. Come in."

"I wish you'd turn over and look at me."

"What a daughter! You don't even know when your mother's not crying." May-Ellen laughed a little and rolled over on her bed. For something to do, the neighbor women, especially Margaret's mother, had cleaned the bedroom, then cleaned and cleaned it again. The wet light shone around May-Ellen's dressing table and collapsed on all the crystal and silver and engraving and swansdown it held: no mail-order beauty there. Miss Nina's very long-dead husband had owned not one, not two, not three: he had owned <u>four</u> jewelry stores in the town, all the town's jewelry stores; he had outfitted every bride imaginable. His last words had been: "It takes me to get a girl started on life in this town." He spat on and polished a huge silver salver one last time, then dropped dead: May Ellen had told him she was marrying

a postman. Then it took May-Ellen no time to be married; and, before old August was cold beneath his silver-embossed casket, the contents of his best store glittered and glimmered and pretended to make an Alladin's cave around the bed where she went with the postman. Moved, polished, replaced, rubbed, all her crystal pots doubled themselves on the mirror-topped dressing table and shot rainbow glances at the widow and the orphan-child. Even during the burial, May-Ellen had still been plump and rosy inside all her black; now, up and cross-legged on her bed, her bed alone, she had shrunk, was still shrinking beneath her golden dragons. The naked eye could almost see it happen. Beginning with little nibbles, the dragons were growing fat from huge chunks of her. Soon the room of rainy, of glinting lights, would be full of very fat little dragons made of thread. Or, perhaps the food May-Ellen loved to eat had turned on her, had eaten her! Ellen imagined the kitchen cupboards swiftly filling with meat and jelly and corn and bread, all sweetly flavored with the taste of May-Ellen. Ellen tried to close her robe around her, but the sides would not meet anymore.

"Look at all I've got here," said May-Ellen. She moved a hand, a foot, across her bed and rattled all the papers there.

"Where did it all come from?" Ellen sat on the edge of the bed. Anyone could see the robe was useless to cover

her.

"That's neither here nor there." Her face would simply not dry. It was wet as the air covering the house, muddy as a fresh-turned grave. But even with a close look, Ellen could see no tears arriving: the face was replenishing itself with water, leaving the eyes out of it.

"Who's this?" Ellen picked up a photograph: a slim woman with a dark cap of waved hair, a bow mouth nearly black with paint; a very short dress showing stockings that gleamed with leg. One of her long hands lay on piano keys; the other reached up to the face of a man whose muscles seemed to bulge through the paper, seemed ready to roar away the whole idea of the young girl and her piano with the huge laugh that distorted his face. In the margin of the picture, there was a blur of one ghostly hand. It was trying to snatch something back to it; that much was clear.

"Me, you nit," she said. "And my man," she breathed.

Ellen was no longer in the room; she hadn't even been born. The mother who was not a mother, went on:

"It was the afternoon we told everyone of our engagement. Papa had just fallen flat on his face at the store, but they hadn't let us know yet at home." She laughed, a laugh that sounded silly through the water on her face. "We weren't at home, not us! Down through twilight, dim, green, though it was noon above the trees, he pulled me, your mother,

out of the witch's sight, old woman, old witch, spitting brown juice on hen's feathers, leaning over foul geraniums the color of candy for his sweet tooth, as far as she could to see us, watch us, and oh, scaring me, scaring me half to death, old crone, sucking in my dear boy's love, spitting it back on the ground like brown juice, yet grudging me it, seeing how our hips grew loose at the sight of each other, then touching us, staining us with words like, 'where's my girl, where's my girl that died screaming you never heard such sound from Hell to push you out, your big shoulders, heavy head, murdering fists that tore her little belly. Then nothing all these years for me but you and those big shoulders, and one turnip could make you stronger than a full meal most. I see what you're after now. But where's my girl?' until I couldn't keep my mouth still any longer, begging him right there in front of her, Please, please get us out; she hates you, loves death, look at me loving you beneath my dress, waiting for one words, one hand, to surrender, <u>allegro ap-</u> <u>pasionnata.</u> She sneered and spat, grazing my new white dress, I could have killed her, taken that turkey throat in my pretty polished nails and squeezed, squeezed, till I popped him free and clear from her heart and he was truly mine. But he said, 'Grandmama, grandmama, how you hurt, how you hurt! But here I am, ever-loving you and I won't ever stop,' and I saw then and there nothing made her sicker than his love, and I

only smiled when he kissed her goodbye, grabbed my hand, and through the chickens, goldenrod, the only things that grew around her house, across about fifty dusty hard yards I had to run, gladly, in my high heels and him just laughing to see the city girl trip, stumble, straps breaking, white pleats bouncing to catch up his sauntering. Sauntering! Oh, he rolled. He rolled like Jordan in and out of those blue jeans he never wore a day after he entered this house, and rolled in boots, English riding boots from God knows where, he loved to polish though he'd never rode a thing but a girl and a mule. Oh those girls--all the while he pulled me through the woods (he finally took my wrist) in and out and roundabout trees and fern and maidenhair to my knees, sun coming through less and less, ground, damper and older, smelling of spring water--I thought on those girls I knew about the day I decided to get him, the first when he was just fifteen and more like a brother than any other thing to the black-haired son he got on some pretty girl gone now to rotten teeth and grits-bloated belly, dirty hair, a three-room shack and a mean man who got her ten more when my Roger was through; the second, the third, the fourth, you count them yourself, all after the rolling river Jordan and they got it, too, though I was the first he'd take off those riding boots for when he was doing it. It took a long time through the woods. In and out, as I said, and how many rocks tripped me till he took off my high heels,

threw one East, one West and kissed each and every pink toe-nail, took me up in his arms then and there and ran with me, ran with me till my head hung back and pine boughs up above spun my eyeballs till they could see not a thing but his running, his green running. To his mother's grave. Where he took all his girls, soft as moss, all moss the old hump twenty-two years old, with a mason jar of pure white fire behind the stone that cut out my question: Why here? Why here? straight from my throat and let him let me go down flat to never such a narrow, such a springy bed. There was one cold spot through that afternoon of lights, the dark green cave of lights that burned beneath my eyelids, the cold spot against my head's crown where I pressed against his mother's tombstone, hard as ice, pushing me deeper with him. A cold spot on my head. Just now I feel it through me all over. The old woman watched. She'd watched from his very first, and he knew it, because just at evening when all my lights had gone dark, he sprang up and called into the trees, "This one, Grandma! This is the one I'm going to have, wait and see! Look, I have it even now!" And I know, though my eyes were swimming through the sweat from his tongue and a glaze that's half-blinded me ever since, that I saw that old flowered feedsack skirt flash out through her hiding place, scurry toward home. I never said a word. He didn't. She--that Dorothea--she certainly didn't. Something between the three of them--though nothing,

not me, not you, ever got her to love him. He believed in the Resurrection and the Life--it's what I've figured all these years when I've thought of it at all. Riding his mother's flanks all those years in the good boots, nothing but the best leather for those bloodied, wrenched-apart thighs that let him out, then let him in again, and again. Did the old woman see it that way? But he did take off those boots for me.

On the way back, he had a rabbit in his trap, but I made him let it go. The old woman had to do on salt pork and blackeyes that night, because that night I made him come back with me, steak and iced tea off the dining room table that night with me, made him listen to me and Liszt half of that night until I looked and he was asleep on the rug. Before that, your grandmother had taken the picture and sent the news to papa at the store, and he'd been dead before Roger fell asleep."

The rain had stopped midway between the sky and the grass. Somewhere about head-height it hung in the air, and softened it. A bird with a throat like a creaking door opened it, closed it, and stopped May-Ellen's words. May-Ellen lay back on her bed and crossed her endragoned arms across her forehead. She gave Ellen a look from beneath the red silk that wondered what her daughter had been hearing.

Ellen had heard nothing. She had found a leather

autograph book, gold and blue: The Paragon Autograph Album, it announced in ribbons and forget-me-nots.

"Oh, can't you leave me alone?" sobbed May-Ellen from beneath the slim arms.

"Then let us part," said Ellen, moving toward the door with the little book, "on these fine words: 'May-Ellen, Do not forget me: The hours full-freighted with a joy too keep For words, have flown too swiftly by, Oh keep That joy undimmed: And though henceforth we two may dwell apart, I ask that some sweet memory in your heart You'll keep of me. Clifford R. Mills'."

"Stop. Read that again."

Ellen, one eye on the book, one eye through the open door to see Welch and Beloved stretching and smoking and putting on clean shirts in their bedroom, read.

"He was a nice boy," said May-Ellen, her voice less underwater now, "But he had skinny legs, was part bald when he was twenty and went to Harvard Law. We used to play four-handed Bach together and Papa loved him. He didn't do a thing to me though. You know what <u>I got</u>." She rolled over. As Ellen left the room, she heard much soft laughter going against her mother's pillow.

"Ellen honey?"

"What, Welch?"

"You sure have grown. I just don't see you wearing that dragon robe anymore. The rest of us can get into ours, but you had to go and grow. But I bet that's all right with you. I bet you're ready for black lace and pink satin ribbons is my guess. You want to see my new autographed picdure of Katherine Hepburn? I guess it's decent, funeral's over. Look."

"Very pretty."

"Well not pretty!"

"Ludie says she's going to call the law one day if you all don't stop smoking so much marijuana up here."

"Oh, Ludie. Oh Law!" Welch rolled his nearly lavender eyes, weak renditions of Ellen's, and sniggered; then he sniggered over his shoulder to see if Beloved caught it. Foster caught it and sniggered back, a true-to-life sound-reflecting mirror, Beloved. Their fingers twinkled; they whipped their ties into windsor knots.

"Next time you hear Ludie getting any dark thoughts, you ask her again where Venusberg came from!" Trying to laugh, he sucked much air into his skinny chest and forced out a loud bray. "But I forget myself. How's little sister, how's little sister bearing up? I declare it's a shame to

think there'll be no more answering cries from those bedsprings across the hall. Beloved and I will bounce, but bounce lonesomely, I mean it. How's little sister?"

"She too is laughing." Ellen pulled the dragon robe off and made a naked procession of herself up and down the hall. Welch watched her, his eyes as slow as her footsteps. "Ask me How am I, Uncle Welch, his daughter. Why don't you inquire after the state of my sorrow?"

"Babiest love, your daddy! We know you grieve, but here I was thinking, 'so young' and even if you did cut your hair short you'd still be too round to look like Katherine Hepburn, correct, Beloved?"

"Correct," said Foster.

"But Katherine Hepburn might like you a lot the way you look and that's a huge advantage in life, to be that type, correct, Beloved?"

"Correct. Please, Welch, I'm going to turn off my earring now, so don't say anything more. It's time to go eat."

"Yes, Beloved. That girl had better put some clothes on. That girl's a piece of fancy-work. That girl's going to distract my mother's innocence with that fancy-work and there'll be hell to pay. I don't want it. What daddy are you talking about? Grief? That postman lived here exclusively for your mama's bed--allegro appassionata, as your

mama has so frequently said--unfaithful--how could he help it, his hand dipping so many times a day into so many mail-boxes--but, as Mrs. Carlyle said of Thomas, he had the 'habit' of preferring your mother to other women. You're no daughter --they barely stopped to look at you--but I've observed sister being a good mother. You're no daughter. What would you like to be?" Welch came close to her. She smelled violets in his thin, tow hair.

Ellen thrust out her breasts to make her Uncle back away.

"I would like to be the resurrection and the life of the mailman," she answered, believing it.

"A fine choice," said Welch, his back against the wall. "Your body's deft, like his. I can see your fingers easily sending messages and receiving them; the good news and the bad news. Come here close."

Welch pulled Ellen's hair back and whispered in her ear, with a strong scent of violets, "You'll find the riding boots and her first Christmas present to him, an inverness cape he used to wrap up in, in the middle of the night, to go down and get ice cream for them after sex, all in a box in the hall closet. All yours now. Put them on and go find out about Venusberg."

"I'll always remember you as the devil incarnate, Uncle Welch."

"Fine words coming from the resurrection and the life!" He reached behind him and took Foster's hand. Foster smiled at the silence he heard. "Did I ever cat around after women, join the working class, break my mother's heart? I love my mother and my one-and-only. I give you the way to raise the dead." He laughed, and Foster, watching him, laughed too. "If you'll only bow down before me."

Ellen joined in the laughter; and, pressing her belly with one hand, dripping her breasts low, she bowed before him, very low.

Before the full moon came out that night into the cleaned warm air, Ellen had sold her heart to make space in her chest for a tiny, throbbing bed: in it, tumbling in Ellen's blood, slept her sweet, laughing mother; Margaret, the Soldier Boy, Sanctissima. With them all inside her, pumping her life, she flexed her muscles, was strong as a strong man.

In the evening, in the grass, beneath the moon, beneath the thick sky, once or twice rumbling thunder, everything happened. Things began to come about so easily, surely, that Ellen of the flashing knife, Ellen of the burning home, Ellen haunted by fantasies of herself as the crude seducer

half the time; half the time as a Camille-figure dripping with ribbons and hoops and blossoms piled in her lap by thin, hungering swains in black velvet jackets, all became undone. For two weeks she slept the day in her bed, came out at night, in the evening, in the grass, beneath the moon, skirting her family who shored themselves up against the night behind May-Ellen's music, safer the quicker the velocity of sounds, rattling magazine pages, shuffling books when May-Ellen, mischief-making, lingered on, even repeated, andante passages. They wanted her doing music fast, loud, absorbing, with no sign of misery. After all, there was nothing else to worry about, but the burden they all carried, of her relapse into celibacy. They could not cure it; it worried them less when she was loud at the piano. Ellen, rushing down the back steps when it was dark, the music started, Ludie above the garage, Venusberg wandering niggertown hunting for a boy friend, a letter to Ellen in her pocket that got dirtier by the night because Ellen would not appear and allow a delivery, Ellen rushing into the black, wet grass, a thin tall moth-human in white shirt (a Roger cast-off) and underpants, rushing to rid herself of even these clothes, to lie shining and secret behind a curve of boxwood hedges that were planted to hide and sweeten the thought of the postman's vegetable garden that flourished behind them.

All of that lasted fourteen nights. She lay flat on

her back. The grass bent against her skin and made it itch; but she allowed the itch to live on, would not scratch. She imagined that the itch would keep her senses alive. She imagined that the dew floating past her skin carried, like any river, a mess of trash, cardboard, rubber, glass. But in this mess, in this dew, were symptoms of her next-day dreams and portents of her future, dreams and future all about nothing but love: rolling in pink-lit dark with a silky shadow, neither her nor him, but strong, causing her pleasure that would not stop, turning her wet enough to slip painlessly into the dream to begin the morning with, pushing her into a swift tide that would drown her in a future that contained nothing but endless that. She imagined that lightening bugs sought to trap themselves in the thicket of her pubic hair. When one drew close she raised her hips towards its red-hot tail, but never got near. She imagined things with segmented bodies, many colors, many legs, breaking through the grass to arch themselves up into her body, to stamp with heavy feet up her long, bright passage until they could nestle in the warm dark of her womb. She kept her thighs tight shut. She was ailing with lust, day in, day out. She kept her hands locked, one beneath the other, under her head.

All of this lasted fourteen nights, fourteen nights followed by thirteen days of swaggering or swooning through dreams. The fourteenth night was her undoing, and began her

future. That night, like all the others, she lay against the earth and felt it slip and slide her across its back like some brown beast she'd been tied to, to lumber her across the universe. Her fingers looked for, found, purple clover against her waist in the dark; two fingers full of purple smell went inside her nostrils, and the smell of purple jogged also into the universe. Why don't I get up? Because my feet stick up heavy as two tombstones down there. Two of us dead to the world, and I was meant to be the resurrection. There has to be a limit. Think, how long does it take death to rub flesh off the bones, how long does it take for a dead man's hair to grow as long as his daughter's, for bones instead of hands to cross his breast? Ellen uncrossed her own hands quickly and rubbed them back to life; her head had been killing them with its weight. Something grew quickly down her chest and covered her belly, but it was not her own hair, it was the night's, its breath much more like hair than like oxygen, out to tangle any naked soul it could catch. Night sat on its haunches all over the world pointing and shouting, said something's new in the rude man's, the postman's vegetable garden; boxwood's perfumy fence won't save us the smell of it, burn it up! Night, first with one stick of lust, then one of death, with an dqual number of each, and many of them, built a funeral pyre as tall as a tower for the naked soul. Ohio Blue Tip from top to toe, Ellen struck herself, went up

in crackles and smoke and fire that flamed her father's name, not her own, until dawn came along and squeezed it dry.

About midnight, cackling to herself about the witching hour, Miss Nina went out and sat down on her side of the boxwood fence, her side, a paragon of a rose garden, all yellow and pink in the daylight, washed out by the dark into rosy ghosts, and guarded at either end by big gnarled crepe myrtle trees with blossoms turned by the rain into Miss Nina's favorite color, lavender. Miss Nina thought there was someone on the bad side of the boxwood fence lying there pretty still but breathing hard. She was afraid it was Roger over there on the bad side, but she decided it would do no harm to talk to him. In case he wanted to come over and talk back to her, maybe carry her off to the bad side, she hooked her elbow around the strongest of the rose bushes, the Dorothy Perkins, then lay down comfortably, her head in Dorothy's sandy bed, to converse in safety.

"Roger," she said, "when I was a bride, scarcely deflowered, August and I got another wedding present: it was a trip to Paris. Did I never relate this story before to you, Roger?"

"Not a bit," Ellen answered.

"In that case. But at the last minute August got his hemorrhoids, through neglect, into such a state (I've always felt they came from too much handling of diamonds and silver)

he had to be rushed off to a hospital bed, not Paris. Loathe to cast the joy from his bride's face, he said he'd let me go on without him if I'd take his sister Avis in his place. Sister Avis was fat as two hogs, and if there's anything I despise it's fat. Also, she never bathed, but would lock herself up in the toilet as many times a day as a million, I think, to smoke cigars, would finally come out just before your kidneys ruptured and then declare some filthy man had been in there smelling up the place. If you think this is all a lie, Roger, and that I've never been to Paris, you just go ask Ellen. She'll tell you. You can imagine how Paris looked to me after crossing the Atlantic with that. It was nothing, nothing, nothing, all day long but eat and sleep and criticize and go look for a Presbyterian church that spoke English. That's Avis. But I fixed her wagon. She'd just got started on her after-breakfast cigar (you know what she ate for breakfast--she got them to get it for her--a big bloody steak, potatoes all fried, an egg salad sandwich, toast and jelly, and two pieces of chocolate pie and then complained because you couldn't get grits out of frogs) and it was our fifth day over when I just calmly pinned on my hat and pushed and pulled like a mule and got an eight-foot highboy in front of the toilet door. Then, by God, I went out, saw Paris and before the day was over fell in with a gang of fetishists. And if you're thinking you

can pass them on the street and not know, and that they look just like you and me, you're right--to a certain extent. I had these gloves, you see. Nobody without my slender arms--paper-thin, really--could get away with them. White kid all the way up to the elbow, and somebody had done some very fancy puncture work on all ten fingers so that it looked like every finger was entwined by delicate roses, violets and leaves. It wasn't anytime before I was sitting drinking champagne with these three fetishists, very refined, too, and before much longer I was realizing what I'd been missing all my life: ap-preciation. I won't go into any details. Enough said that they showed me their gloves and I kept showing them mine. This with all the romance of Paris abounding. But what I'm leading up to is about the fetishist that really struck my fancy. I'll just go ahead and assume, Roger, that you've never read that work of romance and intrigue, Psycopathia Sexualis?

"But yes," answered Ellen, "but, of course, I like some parts better than others." (Especially, she thought, very still among the reeking squash that not even Ludie would pick now, the part that so delighted Janet Sanctissima, Sanctissima's ideal you might say, "Case 166... this ostensible Count Sandor [who] was no man at all, but a woman in male attire--Sarolta [Charlotte], Countess V." Ah, Countess V! Of ancient and noble Hungarian lineage, growing up with a

pack of females who, from a sickbed, gave balls, cried "Bewitched! Bewitched!" at a particular table and carried a key to a "Black Chamber" and might closet themselves up for two years without a single appearance; and all of them "nevertheless, were intellectual, finely educated and amiable." But Countess V. herself--her mother could not bear the light of the moon, her father admired the horsemanship of his daughter and the muscle in her arm. She fell in love at least once a year with persons of her own sex and, indeed, boasted that once in a brothel she had held a girl on each knee; in love she had no constancy. But of all her "marriages" to that series of passionate, weeping, clinging women (the first, at thirteen, to a red-haired English schoolgirl) I'm most fond of the relationship with "Miss D.": "That S. [Sandor!] also had the power to excite passion in other women was shown by the fact that when she [before her marriage with E.] had grown tired of a Miss D., after having spent thousands of guldens on her, she was threatened with shooting by D. if she would become untrue." It's my hard luck, thought Ellen, pushing her thumbs into the pulp of the rotting crooknecks, that I chose a knife to use on Sanctissima instead of a gun. Those with a preference for aiming and firing spend a lifetime being showered with thousands of guldens.) Ellen gave her eyes to the dark and her ears to her grandmother. In her heart she shouted, Sandor, sweetheart, I salute you!

"You must realize," continued Miss Nina, "that the charming gentlemen told me his story himself--there in the precious avenues of Paris while we strolled, while Avis beat on the toilet door and no one came--just because you have read his story from the book does not mean that I didn't get it first-hand! If you had beheld him even you, Roger, would have remarked upon his great charm--wide blue eyes of the deepest brilliance, spinning with enormous fires--as August's diamonds spun with frozen wastes. His hair was curly and black; he was graceful, but thin--wasted away, he said, by his constant, gnawing carnality for sweet female hands encased in kid. Mine, he said--he couldn't get enough of them! They were twin Venus de Milos--they were goddesses in a world of clumsy mortals! Well, we strolled and pleasure overcame him every other step--in exstacy he would grasp my hand, there among all the Parisians, kiss each violet-, rose-strewn knuckle, bear down with his teeth into my leather palms, rush his lips up and down the twenty-two pearl buttons--and occasionally, quite often really, he would grasp his coat to the front of him and rush inside one of those numerous Paris conveniences to emerge shortly exhausted, but smiling and calm until his next attack upon my hands."

"But what does it all mean?" asked Ellen. She could hear footsteps and someone settling quietly into the bean vines at the other end of the vegetable garden. It could be

anyone. It could be love down there. Miss Nina must go. Her grass bed was growing hot, the sight of stars tiresome. The air was growing close; she must find some new space of it to breathe. Ellen rose up on her elbows,careless that Miss Nina might see not only Roger but more Roger, Roger incceased beyond anyone's dream of him--Roger feminine. But Miss Nina did not take her eyes out of the dark. Somewhere in it, as she talked, her hands patted and piled the sand around the Dorothy Perkins into tiny castles and tunnels narrow as her finger.

"It was only that one afternoon," said Miss Nina. "I never saw him or any of them again. Soon we had to come home, with Avis rip-roaring mad about the toilet and bound and determined to let the whole family know what I'd done to her. But I said, you do and I'll tell about all those cigars. What cigars, she said, dumb as a pig in a poke to think I didn't know, but she never told on me. I came home full of a dream and soon August got me full of Welch. Welch was born headfirst, smack-dab straight into that dream and for months and months I nursed him and changed him and rocked him always up to my elbows in those same twenty-two button gloves, hoping against hope. But you see what he became--not a bit of that lovely Paris gentleman-fetishist in him--an ordinary onanist, first of all, with fantasies that shuttled back and forth between me in the nude and rocking him and his daddy in the

nude and polishing him like a sterling silver fork--common, everyday stuff, not what a mother wants for her son. Then that lengthy boring time, and me with your colicky wife-to-be on my hands, when every rag-tag and bob-tail that could get in a pair of tight blue jeans came here to eat me out of house and home and ruin I don't know how many mattresses up in Welch's room. Since I couldn't have what I really wanted, I bless the day of Beloved's coming. Since then there've been no dreams for me except the kind that get in a book. And who--what son or Paris gentleman struck with my hands--can compare with M. de Charlus? Here at the last, after all, I have the best."

There were sounds of thin cloth ripping on thorns, of hands slapping off sand. "I'm going, Roger," said Miss Nina. "I hear your wife commencing the 'Appassionata'--and with that she wrings the night dry and wears herself out enough to sleep. Soon I can have my silence back. I'm going now. Besides, I'm not at all sure it's you, Roger, I've been talking to. But if it is, it's high time you went to bed again, give us all the peace we sorely need. Hurry to bed, Roger--if it's you."

She was as positive as she'd ever been: down there in the butter bean vines Sanctissima crouched, her tears washing away all signs of unfaithfulness, ready to go on her knees for the love of Ellen, the only love that mattered.

Ellen eased into her (Roger's) shirt and her pants. Better not seem too anxious. She began to walk to the other end of the vegetable row. She looked, she knew she looked, like a gleam of the supernatural. The dark supported her whiteness like, she knew, the water Jesus. Midway through the squash, she halted. Not only Sanctissima. Travelling was not beyond Soldier Boy either. Without a doubt he too lurked with Sanctissima, identical twins in a single egg of love ready now to be born through her body. She behaved differently in her next few steps through the vegetables. She strutted, propped a hip beneath a hand, pointed her breasts as though a real built-in bra kept them in step: that was Soldier Boy's style--a movie-girl swivelling out of a machine, a machine herself grinding oily gears. Her eyes, though, she kept languid, old-fashioned, musical, behaving strictly for Sanctissima. Here I come, ready or not. They were ready. She'd been burying her daddy, they'd been making plans--nothing was beyond people full of desire. It was easy to see their design. Her left foot crunched through a rotten squash; she went on, and dirt covered and made a cake of it in her arch. She looked again at the stars: they had drawn a picture of what her lovers had in mind. She listened hard to a small wind rustle the myrtle leaves behind her. In an old language they told the story plain and simple. But that was the tree behind her. The other, the one ahead of Ellen, did its job

as sentinal for the roses and had branches left over for leaning across the boxwood to tease the rude vegetables. It was under these branches that appetite sizzled, sent out hot steam, sought to start roasting her before she was well in the oven. That was the idea. She was nearly there. Her skin crackled from the heat and smelled delicious, like perfume to drink, like roses to eat. In a moment they would have her. Janet Most-Holy, Nameless Soldier; between them, they would grasp her, tear her, eat her. She stepped forward again. It was not her body they wanted. She crept on tiptoe. Her body was for carving by tooth and fingernail; inside it were the dreams, two weeks worth of the fantastic in sex and monstrous erotic growths. They would shell her like a hull and eat the flesh of her visions. Her skin felt like whimpering. It was the meat of Roger inside her; they wanted it, would have it. It swelled inside her, ready to be out and live down the guts of her lovers. She went ahead, ready to give it.

"Reach me one them tomatoes before you come here. I am so hungry. Please."

"Venusberg?"

"Call me anything you like--just don't call me late for supper." A light laugh; heavy sobbing.

"Venusberg? It's you there, no fooling? Who's with you?"

"Who would be with Venusberg? Not even her mother. Even her mother's got herself a man. Ain't no man for Venusberg. Just witchgirl, witchgirl!"

Ellen knelt before a vine, a bean-shielded shadow. Above it shone the moon; no, not a moon, a head and below that, the shadow. Not a shadow. She reached and took the shoulders in her hands. Not a shadow, flesh and blood. And her own. And wanting Ellen. Someone had come. Ellen took one hand away to hold back the vines. Venusberg fell through the clearing into Ellen's arms.

"I love you,Venusberg. Cry it out on me."

She was as light as dust. Every heavy sob that fell from her mouth made her lighter. Yes, the moon was behind her, its light growing thicker by the second. It lighted and pushed against the little back, drove her deeper into Ellen's arms.

"After you all buried him, my mother stopped spending nighttime reading the Bible and watching the TV. The first night after, we went to our room and she said, You want to do something for me? Take out the iron and iron me that yellow taffeta in the back of the closet. I did that, I didn't know what to do. While I did, she rocked and smoked a cigarette. I never saw her smoke a cigarette. Then she put on the dress and put Dixie Peach on her hair and red lipstick on her mouth. I started crying, I cried, Mama Mama, don't

leave me! What's going to happen? Where're you going? She never smiled. She said, 'I'm going to leave you for a while. What's going to happen now is the truth. I'm going out to stop pretending. I'm going to stop making real people into dream things.' Then she turned around all of a sudden, her face was worked up and mean like it hated, and she threw the scissors off the table right in my face. My lip got cut."

Ellen moved her fingers along the lips. At last they found a tiny ridge in the mouth's corner. Following her fingers' direction, she leaned down and kissed it very slightly.

"Mama said, 'Shut up that crying. I never want to hear you cry again. It's time you stopped having a mama just like you just stopped having a daddy. Get on out of here--but don't come following me--and find yourself a boyfriend, something with a knife in his pocket and rowdy and loud, drinking and gambling. Shut up with making things up! All day you do it. At night I hear you call words like music--piano--castle--book--drum majorette--love! Love! Shit shit shit! Nothing like that is ever going to happen to you or me either! You hear? You hear me? And when some night you get flat on your back and start hearing music don't you believe it's coming from Heaven, don't you believe you hear angel's wings stroking the air--it'll only be a man's pants sailing cross the room. And when you get pushed and hammered

and drove down through your bed, don't start thinking that's God calling to you through the gates: it's going to be your own self, moaning from your belly for more, more!' She screamed and screamed at me, then tore out. I stopped crying because I didn't care--all that didn't matter. I heard something. I heard a piece of news about me, Venusberg, and it didn't belong to nobody else."

She lifted her head from Ellen's shoulder. The moonlight covered Ellen's eyes, she couldn't see her thoughts. Venusberg didn't know what to think or fear.

"You mad?" she asked shyly. Her tears were all over Ellen's face. "You mad? What I found out was your daddy is my daddy too. That's my news."

Ellen wouldn't move her face. It still looked straight in the light, the eyes would not come naked for Venusberg. Ellen's hand slid down her back, pausing at each knob on the spine, then back up. Someone was loving Venusberg.

"Why have you been crying so hard?" was all Ellen said.

Venusberg hardly knew. Whatever it was happened very far back and didn't count. Someone was loving her, Venusberg. Venusberg sighed, spoke softly, slowly, relaxed and in pleasure from the end of weeping.

"She said all I ever did was wrong--I couldn't have that anymore. Those words she said--the names of things I

wanted--I think they were the names. I think they were names of things I been wanting. But she said no more; she tore out of there and showed me the way it's got to be. So all that first night long I just sat there, said, Stop wanting, V.B., stop it, V.B. But what do you do? Can't stop just like that--all life long you think up names, you want, and the names get stuck inside you--can't shit it out, can't vomit it out, ain't no doctor going can cut it out. What do you do? So right before daytime when she came back home I took this letter out I been carrying for you seems like forever and I wrote all the names down at the bottom. Once I give you the letter they are your names, you got to take them. All things I wanted are going to belong to you."

Venusberg's back shuddered in peace beneath Ellen's hand. Her mouth spoke words into Ellen's shoulder; full speed ahead, she felt them dive through her body.

"You read me the letter now, Venusberg," said Ellen.

"It's too dark, moon won't stay still to light it up."

"Then say it by heart."

Venusberg cleared her throat through a fog of old tears. She lifted her face. She said, "Dear Ellen, Through a death you'll see your life and need clear before you. When you've pushed the death aside you'll be inside a great change that will be huge joy. Nothing you desire but this joy. Another change: I see you turned into a bat. I can't explain.

Another change: a child comes. He makes the lasting change. Sincerely yours, Venusberg. Book, Castle, Music, Piano, Drum Majorette, Valedictorian, Up North, Good Eye, Dresses, Beauty, Rock Hudson, Home, Love. That's all." She breathed deeply through her big emptiness and then pressed her cheek against Ellen's face where all her things had gone.

"Look back up here, Venusberg."

"What? You have them now. You can't give back."

"The last thing. Say the last name to me. I want that most."

"What."

"You say it."

"Love?"

"Say it."

"Love."

Ellen stood up, shook little Venusberg from her gently, as though she were folding a rag doll against the ground.

"Where you going?"

On her feet, Ellen felt expanded. Bliss was blowing her up like a pink balloon. Soon her feet dangled. It was Ellen inflated. She pressed her chest, above her heart; something was kicking it over and over. She opened her mouth--she expected a word spelled in great letters of white vapor to issue forth: JOY, but it did not. Instead she whispered, Fuck off Sanctissima! Take a flying leap, Nameless

Soldier! Stay dead, Daddy--I got better things to do with my time!

"Listen, Venusberg! Wait for me. No matter how long, you wait right here, don't move, until I come back. No matter how long. Do you hear, Venusberg?"

"No matter how long, I'll be here." For a moment there was something white rustling above her, then Venusberg was left with a moon turning her butter-colored.

Here we go, baby, use the back door, sugar-pie, your mama's winding up the Old Favorite now, Appash-a-snotty's what I always wanted to call it but it always turned her sexy as a rabbit--the back door I said! They'll never hear you through that last loud mess--the faggots are trimming each other's toenails, the old bitch is having a nervous breakdown over some book. Hurry up! the back door, baby, I said! Daddy? Surenuff, sweetheart--who'd you expect, Franklin Delano Roosevelt? It's your old man, here I am! You've done it, I'm back, back for a bigger time than ever! All that sexy stuff in your bonnet these last weeks--you started going at it right, but I was right there with you, pushing, shoving it in, all that sugarcandy that got you so hot--it brought me back! You got my number all right, baby--first time you thought Fuck old Roger started crawling out of that grave. You said you'd do it, you did it--my sweet Resurrection-baby! Now let's go do something feels good--the back door, now, you

heard me! Daddy? You heard me, sure! Stay dead, Daddy--I got better things to do with my time! No way to talk--besides it's too late now, I'm back--and all those things you got to do with your time--you ain't going to do one of them without I'm with you--understand--I'm the way, baby! Call me Roger. Here's the closet, watch it, the door creaks--listen at your mama go! She's going to be hot as hell tonight--let's be sure not to forget your mama whatever we do--in a little while let's declare National Mothers Night. Careful how you handle them boots, baby. They're purer-bred than anything in this here house and they're ready for a lot more action. They don't fit, Roger. Now they do--feel--don't wiggle your toes so much, I tickle easy--Yes, Roger, now they do. You look first-class in them britches, baby, never saw nothing like the way you fill 'em, except for the way I fill 'em--now the fool cape, only bathrobe I ever owned and still stinks to sweet heaven of my sweet prick. There, she's stopped! They're goin to go to bed. I'm ready now. We're ready, sugar. Let's go.

Down the block baby! Run like hell--smell that air, smell that moon! First stop, Miss Betty Lucas, bang hard on that mailbox, brand-new last year algebra teacher, blonde on top and black below--she'll come like a hornet when she hears that bang--bang hard, her mother's deaf as a post, she's just sick to death she's too dried up for the good old me but we'll

bring her youngun down to her marrow bones begging for it, bang hard! Daddy... Roger?

I hear you talking, but bang and hush! Don't shilly-shally, here she comes, the yellow-topped harridan hurrying like hell, she's coming, she's coming, she's here! Now run some more, and run and run and beat those heels of yours hard like I beat mine a million years to get you fed and strong for just this night. Ah, how good to explode! To rise, to rise again! No more cramping grave this night! To feel my britches snap and slip; and a greasy yellow moon up there that wants sweetening more than anything--inside the cape's pocket, the silver flask, her number-two Christmas present meant to wean me from home-spun jars of lightening, God bless her, how dumb can you get? Thinking to filigree me! Feel it, baby? You feel it? It's stars scratching your tongue then exploding in your belly. One more sip, then run some more--there's a widow up the block with nothing to live for but church work and me. Listen at her sing Hallelujah! Jesus H. Christ himself will have to raise more than the dead to get a Hallelujah like that one. Lord God, how many have we had? Fifteen, a hundred, or just two? More filigreed lightening now. There's nothing more wearisome than a night of special deliveries. Down there to that vacant lot, walk slow, my ankles ache--lord God, is it age or death that makes me so tired? Bad girl, bad girl! Now I wonder why did you raise

me up? And it was only yesterday...or a year ago...or a century ago that I coulda tore apart a mountain a female arms and thighs and then stuck it all back together with honey--now, I'm tired, caint remember anything but you, how sad I feel for that big monster man I was, all trapped and hung up now in this prissy-sissy girl walk of yours with shoulders that won't swing back and forth, with hips that get in the way of proper moving. I'm so tired. Does it hurt, Daddy? Nothing hurts or feels like anything anymore, fool girl--hold your shoulders straight, my breath is cramping! All those doorbells we rung--well I didn't ring, not at all. God, God, let's sit down. Sit me down, baby girl, here's the vacant, vacant lot and here's where we'll sit, on the big stone steps that didn't burn down. Now I remember another thing: I'm the one made the lot vacant. It was Hallowe'en and all these trees that're green and thick as I was then were blowing and creaking and red leaves thick as blood were all on these steps. I was fifteen, was with Roy, and the sassy mean old bitch here in this house that was turned us away, said, Not gone give you big ol' boys candy! How come big boys like you are out Hallowe'ening 'stead of out working for your poor mothers like you should be. Go on! Shoo! she yelled at us, If you don't I'm going call the police this minute. Mad! I was mad to beat the band! So I said, Roy, you just wait a minute. Old witch had gone back behind her big old door,

slammed it right at us, and all her lights went out, too. Couldn't have told there was a single soul in that great big house. So I said, Roy, wait a minute. That old bitch ain't so mean she's not going let me sit on the front door steps for a minute and have me a cigarette. Nobody's that mean. But Roy wanted to get back to the girls we had waiting on the sidewalk, giggling and grabbing at each other, thinking Roy and me was so cute to trick or treat, thinkin how we were goin trick or treat their little fannies 'fore old Hallowe'en was done. So I said, You just go on, Roy, keep em quiet anyway you can until I have myself a cigarette. So Roy went, thinking I was crazy to sit there in that howling scary yard all by myself, but I stayed. Couldn't get the butt lighted, though, in the big wind out on the steps. I had to go back up on the porch. Five packs of matches caught on fire. Don't ask me how, I don't know. Just did. And her front room window was cracked open, and the lace curtain was blowing out some and somehow all those packs of matches went in at the window and got caught up in the curtain. Nothing I could do. Nothing. But for a minute I stared straight past the fire into the room. There it was, and there was Grandma back home eatin mashed up turnips by a kerosene lamp--there it was and I was burning it all down--big piano with a Spanish shawl hiding it, big glass cases on both sides of the fireplace with red and blue leather books in them; rugs on top of rugs,

all the color--and more--of the books. Chairs and settees covered in flowers and birds. And all warm, and Grandma back home starting to freeze at night. Summer was gone. It got warmer, so much warmer I had to shut my eyes to keep from seeing what made it warm and nearly broke my ass falling down these steps and gettin back to Roy and the girls. I nearly broke both them girls in half that night then turned around and did it all over again. But here we are. Sit me down, honey, stretch me way out in the leg and shoulder, though God knows it's still not good enough for a man of my size that I was. These stones are still warm. Summer is here. There's a draft on my back though coming from all them empty rooms behind us. Tell me why I'm here."

"Daddy, you might be tired, but I'm on fire! Let's move, Daddy, let's ring some more doorbells! Let's move, let's try it with a man, Daddy, a man's doorbell! There's Mr. James Cornelius down the street, him!"

"God knows! Honor thy father, you fool girl! And you know what it'd be like with a man? Huh? Just like dumb Welch and dumb Foster. I know, because I watched them at it one time and it was just dumb! Catch me. And I'm tired and getting tireder, didn't I tell you! Bend your elbow apiece and take some of the tired out of my bones. And tell me, fool girl, why I'm here. I keep forgetting everything."

"James Cornelius is the son of Mercy Cornelius, Daddy,

the one who was the witch who lived in this house you burned down, all thirty-two rooms, Daddy, and he's pretty, had blond hair and a red moustache and is forty years old and reads Latin all his life long on old Mercy's money, been to Europe three times, and he won't sell this lot nor do a thing with it. Let's have him, Daddy."

"Goddam you to hell, girl! Won't you remember you're a man as long as I'm with you in these here boots! I give you the time of your life tonight like no other girl alive's had it, and you won't show thankfulness. Dammit, girl!"

"Daddy, won't you remember you're a girl as long as you're here with me in these boots, Daddy? You can remember that. Tell me how you got here."

Ellen felt a long helpless sigh escape her, a sigh she'd never dreamed of feeling, never felt. A story coiled up tight inside her and then loosened itself from her lips in her father's voice. Then night in the vacant lot, though green and rank with old moss, old boxwood, old wisteria and new blooms spreading over shabby blooms, though it was June, was cold. Or perhaps it was the stones, mortared together to arc elegantly below an arcing porch, that were cold. Behind them, for a distance of thirty-two vanished rooms, nothing grew but old weeds and vines close to the ground. In that space, a slight wind blew making them hunch further inside the Inverness. The night, though it was June, had a

Hallowe'en scare about it.

The sigh repeated itself.

"You know what happened?" said Roger. "It was nothing, like falling off a log. But I don't recommend it. Try to keep away from it, death. It upsets every damn thing you can think of, ruins your habits, all of them, both sour and sweet, both rotten and delicious." And, then another sigh. Ellen's body began shaking with the new ghost's sighs. Soon they sounded like moans; more like groans and rattling chains than sighs. But the ghost went on.

"I don't mean the first part--that rich bastard's hound dog of a son's wad of car flying through the air at me: just another big body explosion, the biggest of all. Didn't object to that. What got to me was the funeral home, James Crumpler with one of my arms in his hand, Ernest Crumpler with my other arm, both of 'em cramming 'em down a pair of black sleeves, then working an hour to get my feet pointed right, in line with my head. Then prettification, prettification! half the night long--swabbing, powdering, dusting, rouging, draining, combing enough to make a whore blush. It was more than I can tell you--like a bride sweetening the meat with all the tricks you can name for the big wedding night. Then they covered me up all alone, and there I was sheer craziness itself in the dark, wondering when Hell or Heaven was going to start. Nothing started. I kept myself

going saying One, Two buckle my shoe; and Lucy Locket lost her pocket; and There was an old whore from Tibet, until--Jesus save me!--I felt new hands all over me, undressing me, rubbing me; something whispering, something kissing. I couldn't move. When it climbed on top of me, I couldn't fight it off. Couldn't say No! Get off me! It's not this way! Oh, Jesus save me! It was all over me, it was me getting raped and I couldn't move. It took a long, long time down in the hole in the dark; and it was chuckling and hissing and cursing and whispering, More! More! Listen to me! I never raped once, not anything, not in all my life. Even the time I tied up the nanny goat for a whole month one summer every time Grandma went to spend the day at the grave, it wasn't that. It was the happiest old nanny in the world. I figured it out at last. I figured, This is Hell forever, what I get for all I did to women. Btt finally it stopped. A light started somewhere around me and I saw its face. It was like your mama's diamond with the sun in it. It was like a maggot in the middle of a dead cat's bowels. It was like the head of a rose in a woman's hands. It was the outhouse floor at the end of a week-long August revival. It let me look at it. Then it said..."

The ghost's voice of sighs and moans changed, became harsh and distinct and filled more with stink than sound. The words became old.

"Then it said, 'Ah, my beloved, my own! You have come unto me. My precious, my darling, my jewel. Your love to me is the taste of honey and the sweetest of wine; your touch is the caress of summer; your passion the fire that dispels all frozen winter from my body. I have lived eternity to crush your lips. I gave up Paradise and the voice of God to create you. Forever will I lean on your breast; forever will my love pour through you. Name it, my darling! Name your most cherished dream, name your gift from me and it will be yours for one whole night long before forever you come to grace my home, forever.' I tried to struggle," the ghost moaned again, "I tried so hard, but what poured through me was despair, cold calculated despair that froze me more, that deadened me more than death itself. Then its voice changed to yours; its face became yours, fresh and simple with a lust I could understand. You were against me, not it; and I knew what my wish was, knew it exactly. We began to rise. Then we were here."

The night became terribly still. The wind coming through the rooms that were not there, behind them, stopped entirely. A bird chirped in the thickness of a camellia bush against the steps.

"Morning is coming," said the old ghost. "Soon it'll get me again."

"Did it have Welch's face at all?" asked Ellen.

"I don't know. I don't remember. If you say so." The voice of her father was cracking and crumpling inside Ellen. She began to feel lighter. Her feet moved back and forth inside the boots. Her toes were alone. She saw the moon come out and bring a new freshness with it. The stink of old rooms, of old ground turned up too many times, of very old, old women's dresses was going.

"Daddy?" she said, one more time.

"Oh what, oh what?" cried the hurting voice. "Why don't you look behind you?"

Ellen looked behind her. It was dawn coming, pulling itself up over the vacant lot and casting an anaemic flush on the porch stones.

"I looked," Ellen answered. "It's daylight almost here."

"Yes, goddammit!" the ghost of the father howled.

"What I was going to ask is what's going to happen now?" Her body felt cool and vacant inside, like the land she sat on. And a certain wonder was beginning in her mind at why she was not terrified because of a night full of a ghost or why she was not terrified at the thought that she might have gone mad in the old vegetable garden back there and had been imagining a night full of ghosts, which was worse. But she was not terrified or worried. She was only feeling cool and vacant, and there was a beginning flush of

warmth on her neck where the day was falling from the sky.

"Back to hell, you ought to know by now, back to hell and the devil's bed time without end to pay for all the beds that went on before; and I used to think, used to know without a doubt while I went back and forth with my big bag and the white letters that when I died I could stop all this and it would at last, finally, be my mother, my mother, my mother forever and ever! Dorothea, Dorothea!" the ghost whispered, in agony. "I didn't dare name you for her, didn't dare. And for all I know, for all the old woman would tell me you're the image of her. You might be, don't you see, the face I kept trying to look down to all the times I rode the grave and she watched from the woods. She'd never say. Carried you there straight from your christening, me drunk as a coot in a vanilla ice-cream suit your mama got me for the day in church and behind me a pack of women baying like blood hounds, 'where you going with that baby? Bring back that baby, you fool Roger', screaming, crying, your mama wouldn't sleep with me for an entire week after, but I went on, laughing like something else and you yelling with your long dress tangling between my legs; how I drove it I don't know, but I did, straight out there, got up the steps somehow and said, 'look here what I brought you, grandma! Who does she look like most?' And the old woman grabs hold of my pants leg with one hand and your dress with the other and pulls us down and

squinches up her face and sucks in her cheeks and lets go with a wad of juice all over us. 'Not my girl! Not my Dorothea! Git it out of my sight!' And she hollered and hollered and fell over forwards in her chair and wouldn't stop until I got you back in the car and was pulling away and I looked back and there was nothing to her but what I could see through the dust and the heat and my own whiskey tears. Oh, Jesus, the sun! Look at it fall! For Jesus' sake, here I go! For Jesus sake, stay out of beds and go to heaven and find my lovely mother! Tonight's gone to hell!"

A spray of water, a few drops, fell on Ellen's face. She lifted her hand to it, but barely felt it.

"I christen thee Dorothea!" a voice shouted. "I spit on you and christen thee Dorothea!" the voice shouted again; and then it was gone.

It had been a light rain coming with the sunrise, so light that the few drops that had hit the japonica leaves beside the steps could not find the weight or the current to roll to the ground. Ellen wet her fingertip on one, then reached for her face, but it was dry.

Halfway home, Ellen removed the heavy boots, left them in somebody's garbage, and sauntered barefoot the rest

of the way, twirling and floating the heavy cape behind her. She hummed several tunes until she hit on one she liked. She entered her own yard, let the dew soak her feet good, then knelt and washed her hands in it, rubbing her fingers lightly back and forth over the tips of the grass. Then she went on, passing under the willows, then tiptoeing past the squash. Venusberg was asleep, curled close against the hedge and hugging herself against a chill. Waving the cape up and down in rhythm, Ellen stood above her and finished the song (from a play she'd read) loudly enough to wake Venusberg.

"The Baron is drunk! The Bar-ron is drunk!"

Venusberg opened her eyes and started to scream. She thought she saw a giant bat above her, flapping its wings, readying itself to swoop down and eat her up. But not a sound came from her mouth; Ellen's bare foot had come down over her lips. It arched there, pink, wet and clean from the morning dew, and held the mouth down firmly until the warm brown eye that stared up at her lost its fear and showed happiness.

"I'll take my foot off now and you shut up."

Venusberg's head nodded, grinding itself deeper beneath the foot into the tomato vines.

"I'm real cold," said Venusberg. Her mouth had felt flattened, but it was coming back to life.

"I'll warm you," said Ellen. She took off the cape with a flourish that Roger had never accomplished with it and

spread it over the girl. Venusberg huddled; then she relaxed and waited. The cape's heavy collar nearly covered her face. One of her pigtails bristled against a tomato, rotting, splitting, and letting some yellowish juice trickle out.

"I'm not cold at all." Ellen felt warm; she felt part of the sun, which was making her transparent, making of her a narrow canyon where the current of its heat could pass, then spread in a huge bright flood over Venusberg.

"But you'll catch cold," Venusberg answered.

"From you?"

"Out there, from the dawn chill. In here it's sure warm."

With two slow movements, with one quick clumsy one, Ellen went beneath the cape.

Venusberg sighed. She whispered, through the sigh, into Ellen's shoulder: "... sincerely yours, Venusberg. Book, castle, music, piano, drum majorette, valedictorian, up North, good eye, dresses, beauty... home... home... Ellen, Ellen, Ellen," she gasped, finally.

Ellen's feet began to stick out from beneath the cape, digging their toes into the gray vegetable garden earth. Before long, their pink, clean, wetness had all gone and they were thick with dust. The cape rocked.

On the other side of the hedge, Beloved snapped a leaf off with his fingernails and began to chew gently on it with

his front teeth.

"It must run in the family," he said.

"Whisper!" Welch screamed back, in a whisper.

"If it hadn't been for your hair, we wouldn't be here at all. It makes me mad for you to say 'whisper!' like that." His hand moved up to turn off the pearl earring.

Welch had had a dream just before dawn that he was losing all his hair. Just before he was completely bald, and ugly as sin, he had waked up, sweating and shaking. Since then, he had made Beloved pace around the yard with him, barefoot, their Japanese robes twirling like silk gardens of dragons around them while he worried and insisted many times that Beloved stop walking and peer once again through Miss Nina's magnifying glass at his hair.

"You take your hand down and listen to me!" whispered Welch. "First my hair all going and now this! I should have known! I should have known! It's that postman coming out again in her and bound and determined to ruin my mother's peace of mind. I have never been able to impress on you enough how delicate that woman's peace of mind is, and she finds out everything, and she's going to find out this, something she'd never think of in a million years--her innocent heart!--take your hand down!--and even you've heard of coronaries and I'll die, just die without my mother!" Welch's whispering tottered toward shrill screaming. Beloved turned

off his earring, and reached a heavy hand around Welch's neck to draw his face against his shoulder.

"You come on, honey," Beloved whispered into the thinning curls beneath his chin. "We're going in the kitchen and have us a co'cola and let me look in your hair again. But I swear I've never seen it thicker."

The two men turned from the hedge and pattered silently away across the drying grass.

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you, sugar?" murmured Welch.

Behind them, the cape shook as though a little wind had found a way inside it, then lay still.

Toward noon, the smell of butter beans simmering in salt pork slid beneath Miss Nina's door and woke her. She had been awake, she remembered, as her stomach turned and withdrew deeper inside her at the smell of food, she'd been awake a terribly long time the night before remembering a great deal. She looked across her room and saw that the memory of her wakefulness was correct. Dresses, all in the fashion of 1920, silks, voile, lace, were scattered across the floor, clinging where they could to little chairs. Among them, brought out by the sun, glittered garnets and diamonds

and turquoises and pearls, set in the old-fashioned lacework of platinum and gold. Piles of long kid gloves, nearly yellow, flocked together in a heap like ageing doves.

From her bed, Miss Nina stared hard at the pile of gloves until her eyes woke and focussed. To her, the gloves looked pure and new.

"Now I have everything," she said to the gloves. "It took me all night to find everything, but now I have everything and all I have to do is get to Paris."

She sat up and pushed the sheets away and began craning her neck to see all parts of her body. Miss Nina slept naked so that, without the loss of a moment, she could inspect her magnificent thinness early each day, so that she could reassure herself that no curl or lump of fat had clamped itself stealthily to her bones during the night. This morning she was thinner than ever. So thin, she noticed, that the flesh was hardly enough to wrinkle. She reached around a hand as far as it would go and felt her back. It was like a huge fishbone, she decided happily, picked clean. "The day is hot," she told the gloves, "like every day, it is hot, so I will wear the backless dress and show them all my wonderful fishbone back." She remembered what she was going to do. "Now all I have to do is get to Paris," she said.

She got up and swept her hands through the limp, frail dresses in her closet until she found the backless. It was

thin voile, with a high front and long, loose sleeves. It reached to her ankles and was printed all over with huge, brown fish. She had bought it in town the last time they had let her leave the house, many years ago. She put it on and stood before her tall triple mirror between the windows. For a little while she looked over her shoulder, admired the great fishbone and poked at her ribs with a finger. She was happy to see that all parts of her body were visible beneath the thin voile. She had stopped bothering with underwear in 1947. She began rummaging in the heap of jewelry and finally decided on three diamond brooches, two large, one small. She pinned them across her chest so that they swung and hung heavily beneath her jutting collarbone.

"August was a fool to end all fools," she told her glittering chest. "Indeed it is <u>not</u> vulgar to wear three brooches. In fact, I am so angry with the old fool for keeping me bare all those years I shall wear the garnet one too."

There was no more space across her chest, but the huge lump of garnets fitted nicely about a finger's space beneath the middle brooch. When Miss Nina had admired herself a moment more and had kissed her reflection in the center mirror goodbye, she trampled lightly in her bare feet across the piles of dresses and made her way down the hall, the brown fish alive and sinuous around her, and smelling strongly of years of pomander ball scent from the closet.

All the bedroom doors stood open and let her see the hot bright June light shimmering above the unmade beds, but the bathroom door was closed. She twisted the knob, but it would not open. There was a noise behind the door.

"There is someone puking within," she muttered, and quickly took her hand from the knob. "Welch!" she called. "How many times have I told you never to mix gin and marijuana! One or the other, the other or the one, but never both."

There was no answer, but the noise went ahead to a dry, retching end.

"And I have to, badly," Miss Nina said to the doorknob. "There is money in this house for everything but another bathroom." The noise behind the door stopped abruptly; the toilet flushed and water began splashing heavily into the sink. The running water made matters worse for Miss Nina.

"If you're ashamed of your mother's natural functions, Welch, you can merely turn your head aside while I am at it. Even Madame Recamier had to sometimes, although there is no direct evidence to lead us to that conclusion. Even Proust. Even his mother, I suspect. Let me in!"

When the doorknob still refused to turn, Miss Nina stood silently for a moment, gauging the limit of her body's patience. "Very well, Welch, what your mother does now shall be upon your head. Don't come to me when the neighbors complain."

When she reached the other end of the hall, Miss Nina climbed carefully up on the chest where Ellen had lain days before, wrapped in her tight silk dragons and watching the rain. The old woman stood still for a moment steadying herself, then caught the long skirt of fishes up and wrapped it around her shoulders. When she was sure that she was bare from the waist down and was sure that no sliver of voile could get trapped and wet between her legs, she grasped the bottom of the open window and eased her fleshless, naked flanks into the sunlight outside. She was just in time. Miss Nina left the window and went downstairs, the dry brown fish swimming behind her, her mouth stretched into a smile over her body's relief and her own marvelous adaptability.

Beloved, down below the window, was sitting on the kitchen steps and talking across the January's picket fence to Mrs. January. Mrs. January was on her knees before her shockingly white bulldog, stroking her hand through its enormous rolls of shorthaired fat and peering seriously into its face. Buster looked up at her and occasionally flapped his thick tongue across her chin.

"You stop that, you hear, Buster? Foster you sure you don't know anything about pinkeye?"

"All I know is what I said, your eyes get pink and it's catching. I wouldn't let Buster kiss me if I were you. Did you just now feel rain?"

Mrs. January's knees were beginning to itch from kneeling in the grass; and it was a strain to lift her face from Buster's and look at the sky. "Not a drop," she answered. "One time I thought it was raining and it was just Buster spilling Margaret's ice tea down my legs, but you mention a nice drink of ice tea at home with her family these days to that girl and all you get back is education, education all summer long and not a word to say what she intends in the fall when everybody and his brother she's known since first grade is getting married. I wouldn't worry so much about Buster's pinkeye except he ate the pinkeye medicine the vet gave us yesterday--gave! Seven dollars before I got out of that office, which is more than Rudyard's ingrown toenail cost last year--he grabbed it right out of my hand when I was going to drop it in his eyes and swallowed it, stopper and all, and now Rudyard's gone to Climax with the car for four days to see if his sister's all right and the vet is four miles out. That woman has been the bane of my existence ever since I married Rudyard. Won't write, won't talk on the telephone so that every six months Rudyard, being the man he is, thinks he's got to traipse all the way over there and check on her. Where's y'all's car, Foster?"

Foster watched Buster collapse with a small thud into the grass and close his pink eyes to sleep. Foster's head felt wet, and when he put his hand against it, his hand came away wet. In the summer sometimes, he remembered, it rains in one yard and not in the next. He wished that Buster would die right away from the pinkeye so that Mrs. January would have to take him away and bury him. There was a city ordinance against burying in your yard. Then he could finish his sun tan in peace and read the last pages of his new paperback that he got from New York that morning. It was all about whips and boys who wore black leather belts and boots and had whips up in those New York apartments. Foster could not imagine where the writer had gotten such an idea, but he wanted to finish it before he had to go in and watch what happened to Dr. Allison next on "Living Medicine" with Welch. He did not want to have to sit and wonder about how the whips came out while Dr. Allison was working on a coronary. If he held his book over his face while he turned off the earring, Mrs. January would see what he was reading.

"I don't see your car in the driveway, Foster," said Mrs. January.

"May-Ellen's gone to the grave in it."

"Will you look at that? How can I look at his eyes when he's stretched out asleep? Buster just doesn't take an interest in getting well." Mrs. January bent and lifted

Buster's head with one hand, but Buster would not open his eyes again; instead, he opened his mouth and tried to bite her, but he was so slow, so sleepy, his mouth was so full of drool that he could not catch the hand that fed him pinkeye medicine. Mrs. January seemed to lose interest in Buster, then. First she wiped her hand across the giant begonias growing on her sundress, then lifted it to pat her permanent wave before she opened the fence gate and went across the yard to Foster. Foster was quick enough to get the book beneath him before Mrs. January got close enough to see it. But the book also dragged his open tube of suntan oil with it and, as Mrs. January began talking to him, Foster could feel the grease begin to squeeze through the knit of his new red bathing trunks.

"What is it you're reading, Foster? I wish I had time but with that sister-in-law in Climax half the time and Buster's pinkeye half the time and Margaret's education the rest of the time, you tell me when I can read anything but the new brides once a week. She is like a sister to me, Foster, and this constant grave visiting is beginning to worry me, but I am not actually a member of the family and wouldn't push myself forward to speak but just this moment it came to me that you, too, are not actually a member either, so I thought we would talk about her. What do you think, Foster?"

"I haven't ever felt like a sister to her," Beloved

answered. He shifted on the steps, to protect, at least, one half of his new red suit from the oozing grease, but the movement brought only a new thick spurt that went straight inside the knit. It was an odd, rather familiar sensation, but intensely uncomfortable since it was unaccompanied by any feelings of pleasure. He heard, at the same time, the spine of his paperback crack. If I ever go to New York City Greenwich Village, Beloved thought, and one of those boys with the black leather belts and boots and jackets comes up to me and starts talking about a whip up there in his apartment I'm just going to turn around and say, You pervert!

Mrs. January folded her arms across the bulging begonias on her chest. "What I mean is," she said, "it cannot be healthy, just like I told Rudyard before he left last night, it cannot be healthy for a woman as good-looking as she still is, although we are actually the exact same age, to sit out there all afternoon every afternoon on that new aluminum collapsible chair I myself saw her buy at Sears' garden supply for this very purpose and cry and carry on and then get back in the car and come home and eat supper just like nothing ever went on all afternoon. If nothing else, there's always sunstroke out there without a hat on your head."

Over Beloved's head, Mrs. January could see through the kitchen window. Ludie was in there stirring pots on the stove for dinner. Ludie looked strange, and it took Mrs.

January several minutes to decide that her strangeness came from wearing a red satin dress in the kitchen.

In a minute, Foster was thinking, at least it can't be too long and Welch'll come to the back door and push the screen door just a little bit too hard against my back and say very softly and lovingly, "If you don't hurry up, you're going to miss the part where he scrubs up before the operation." Until then... He sighed and answered Mrs. January.

"We are keeping an eye out, Mrs. January, so there's no cause for you to have to drive out there behind her..."

"I only did it one time out of worry..."

"... but we are keeping an eye out, and we think it's going to wear off before too long. Something is bound to happen, after all, to people that just makes that kind of thing wear off."

The ooze through Foster's bathing trunks was becoming unbearable; and he would never have time now to finish the whip book before it was time. And still Mrs. January stood, staring over him into the kitchen and looking unsatisfied.

Foster felt the screen door press sharply, silently, into his bare back.

"If you don't hurry up, you're going to miss the part where he scrubs up before the operation," said Welch. "It is good to see you looking so tremendous, Mrs. January."

"And you have been a rascal flatterer from the day of

your birth, Welch," Mrs. January answered, blushing and looking satisfied. "It is beyond me how you have escaped the clutches of scheming womanhood in this town but I am glad to say here and now that you have,your mother needs you so much... and a strong arm for your sister in her trial... but it is hard to look like anything at all these days, these times, it is an effort. Some of us make an effort, some of us don't." Mrs. January looked through the screen door at Welch and it seemed to him that she could distinctly see huge bunches of his black curls falling out. In his alarm, he pressed the screen door hard and viciously and brought a short scream out of Foster. It was a moment before they noticed that Mrs. January was almost back into her own yard again.

"You let me know if I can do a thing," she called back. "Sometimes it's a thing men never realize but a woman needs a woman in an hour of trial, so you let me know. Here I go back to that Buster."

Through the slats of the picket fence, Foster and Welch could see exposed Mrs. January's tremendous white buttocks as she bent over the sleeping Buster.

"I have never been able to understand how women can't keep their dresses down decently," said Foster. He reached beneath him. The book was ruined, and before Welch had had a chance to read it, just like his new red trunks.

"Your back is very red and unattractive," said Welch

irritably. "And you smell funny. Yes, you stink." Welch slipped out from behind the screen and bent his nose over Foster. He was silent for a moment while his eyes became huge and his face white. Foster sat very still.

"Beloved," Welch finally whispered, "what have you done? Someone has pissed in your hair!"

Ellen sat very still on the edge of the tub until she heard her grandmother go away from the bathroom door. From the tall window, around the edges of the green plastic shell-stamped curtain, she could see that the summer was not changing at all. Below, the sprinkler (no one could keep Miss Nina from turning it on in the heat of the day) whirled furiously and shot out sprays of water that all but disappeared in the waves of heat. Below, Ellen's mother was putting a collapsible garden chair into the back of the car. She shifted it easily inside, deft from practice, and was careful not to snag her nylons. Upstairs, in the bathroom, her daughter saw sunspots from the glare the sun struck from its aluminum frame. For a moment, before she got in the car, May-Ellen held up her ten fingers before her face, as though she were inspecting them for dust or counting them to see if all were there. She tugged at the tight black linen sheath around her

hips to keep it from wrinkling, then got behind the steering wheel and backed out of the gravel driveway.

For a little while, nothing moved in the yard but the dashing sprays of water and the grass, which bent below the water's rhythmic push then again straightened itself, slowly, blade by blade. A little creek was forming on the winding path of gray flagstones that led from house to street. It meandered quietly down to the front porch, full of brown dust and drowning ants. Below, directly beneath the bathroom window, the front door slammed shut; and, by leaning forward a little on the tub, Ellen could see Ludie standing there, oddly foreshortened, from Ellen's viewpoint a wobbly triangle that started with black straw at its peak and became shimmering red satin on its three sides.

The tears that were flowing down Ellen's cheeks silently and separately, stopped suddenly, frozen to her face, terrified by the possibility of hope. If the triangle would become Ludie again; if Ludie would stay still and not go down the steps and up the driveway to stand in the shadow of the thickly planted trees that kept the house from the sight of the street where she would wait twenty minutes for the bus to town, as she had been doing every day since the funeral, if Ludie would stay still and wait for Ellen to come down from the bathroom, if Ludie would stay still and wait for Ellen and wait to wipe Ellen's tears away and hug her and

tell her comfort as she had done all the nights of the childhood bad dreams brought on by the scary music from the parlor, the music that tried so many nights to creep into her bed with her and turn into a bear or a snake or an alligator and eat her up, bones and all, if Ludie would stay still and miss the bus and wipe the tears away, then Ellen would open her mouth and say, "Ludie, I am pregnant as my sister Venusberg foretold I would be; I am pregnant by the Nameless Soldier, do something, please, to help me," then help would come.

Ellen's teeth found the ruffle of the plastic curtain and began to ruin it with her chewing. The triangle had an arm and a hand that lifted itself to the huge straw picture hat and repinned it more securely to its peak. Then Ludie went down the steps, neatly skirting the water's spray, and went up the driveway to the bus stop. At each step she took, Ludie's brand new gold anklet glittered beneath her nylons.

The key would not turn to unlock the door; Ellen's hands were slippery with sweat. She threw her face against the window's screen, tasting its black rust on her lips.

"Ludie! Ludie!" she screamed, "wait for me to get there. Don't go anywhere yet!" Ludie was already in the trees' shadow, everything about her lost to sight except for her dress's violent red that flamed at Ellen through the leaves.

"I don't have time for anything at all," Ludie called

back. Her voice was low and clear and comfortable in the cool shadow.

"You wait!" Ellen screamed again.

The key turned, the hall, a painted, wooden tunnel, whirled and pushed Ellen urgently down its length until her feet struck the staircase that trembled beneath her but let her down gently. There was the dark, sullen heat of the hall; there was the icy atmosphere trapped behind the parlor door, freezing the multitude of embroidered flora and fauna into eternal, pretty, summery stances. The air-conditioner hidden behind its dress of ruffled organdy muttered to Ellen as she sped past.

"Halt! Who goes there!" Miss Nina's voice shot out of the sun porch and tried to stop her, but not seriously. On the sun porch, Miss Nina and Welch and Foster sat still and darkened by the room's heavy green blinds that shuttered the glass walls from floor to ceiling. Only the white and purple African violets, supported by tiers of curling, white-painted plant stands moved, trembling in the cold that crept in from the parlor. Only the handsome Dr. Allison, his face grim and perspiring above his white mask, had life and shone out from the cumbersome green of the sun porch. In the small, 21-inch world where he operated, Dr. Allison seemed luminous, deliberate, eager. Miss Nina, Welch, and Foster stayed still and kept their eyes fastened on him.

"In a minute," Ellen said, and no one answered her. There was no struggle with the front door; it let her out into the heat with a smooth, well-oiled swing inside. She was across the yard so quickly that the sprinkler had time for only one quick slash of water across her legs.

The trees above the sidewalk made a ledge of thick, watching darkness over them, but there was nothing in the trees but an abandoned bird nest. The looking, listening baby birds had grown up two summers before and had gone elsewhere.

Ludie did not take her eyes off the street. Someday she would stare the bus into making an early appearance.

Ellen watched with her, their combined gaze sliding up and down the street's layers of heat, piercing, then ignoring the Chevrolets, Fords, Buicks, the Cadillac that came up the hill toward them, then passed them by. Still, the bus had not come. Ludie said nothing, ignoring everything but her expectation of the bus; her smooth brown face, her eyes squinting against the sun, expressed nothing but a simple endurance of the heat. Darkening circles of sweat were beginning beneath the arms of the red satin and soon would travel so far down the dress that dampness would begin to outline the rib cage that strained out against the material. Ludie did not seem to care. Ellen looked once from the street and into her face, for an invitation to talk, but Ludie ignored

that, too. The light, filtering through the floppy straw on her head was causing tiny luminous pimples to erupt over the dark skin.

"Ludie, help me," Ellen said at last. The bus should come any minute.

"This is my afternoon off."

"By whose leave?" Ellen demanded, shaking with fright.

"By my own leave!"

The heat pushing in under the shadows to join them was beginning to squeeze anger out of their throats. They were beginning to hate each other; if it would only become cool again, they could love each other.

You slave! Ellen thought. She imagined standing in the marketplace, costumed in the mustaches, the broad hat, the dainty shirt of a planter buying Ludie; and Ludie's back was bent and striped from whips and her faded dress torn and her eyes terrified. Ellen would clamp the shackles around her ankles and drive her, by wagon, home and let her days and nights be lorded over by a monstrous overseer in the limitless cotton fields, days and nights broken only by greasy collards and cornbread and the monstrous overseer's lust and years and years worth of rickety half-white pickaninnies; and finally Ludie would come crawling to Ellen's feet, plant her mouth down on Ellen's boot, beg, "Mercy, Mercy, my lord!" And, finally, Ellen could say again, Then help me; if you want mercy,

then help me!

Ludie's eyes beneath the dark of the hat were perhaps boring through her brain, were perhaps seeing all Ellen imagined for her.

"'By whose leave!'" Ludie mimicked furiously. "Smart aleck missy college girl!" Ludie turned sharply on one high heel and strutted, ahdn on hip, up the sidewalk like a huge, witless, ridiculous chicken, a rendition of what she thought of Ellen. Just as sharply, she turned back around, stood still and faced her. "White girl!" she muttered; "White arty-fact of our soci-a-tee! One word from me to Black Power and you're dead in bed tonight!" The brim of the straw drooped so low that Ellen could see nothing of the face but the white teeth that showed through the words.

Ellen could not tell where she found the speech; it simply came out of her, and she was amazed by her own memory.

"Ludie," she said, "... there I was like I am now, in the heat, dog-tired, when Lo! I dreamed a dream that a big white angel appeared by my bed shining and stark naked in the raiment of the Lord and this angel fell upon me and folded me in his wings and lifted me to the glory of Jesus' heaven like I never felt before and out of the throat of the angel came a multitude of voices singing Glory to God in the highest and this angel carried me wrapped in his giant wings through the Valley of the Shadow of Death and through the pit

of everlasting fire where we wrasseled with the Devil and won--and then I was uplifted, uplifted so high the pearly gates came before me, and I heard the voice of God say, This is my daughter Ellen with whom I am well pleased and the angels' singing came upon me again and again and then I woke up and I was alone. Except I heard the rustle of my big white angel as his wings beat him back into heaven. And nine months later to the day... a child shall be born unto me... Ludie, help me. I am pregnant. What will I do?"

"Jesus, Jesus," Ludie whispered. "Oh, Goddam!"

Ludie's face, before so smooth and powdered against the heat, now was running with sweat; or else tears were flowing not only from her eyes but from every pore of her skin.

"I have to go away. If I stay, they will watch me and talk about me. My mother will watch and not know what to do; Grandmama will talk and talk about it to me; Welch and Beloved will turn their heads away when I get big. Pregnant women make them sick; they were sick with my mother many months before I was born. But my mother didn't care, she was so happy. I will care. Ludie, help me."

"Oh, goddam," Ludie whispered. "Oh, Jesus, Jesus!"

They stood there under the dark trees, crying, cursing until the bus came by and Ludie waved it away.

The marvelous, self-sacrificing sound of "Living Medicine"'s theme music resolved itself into a few chords of glowing nobility. Dr. Allison, now wearing a manful tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows put his arm around the bereft widow and together they faced the dawn of a new day through the hospital's picture window while the credits crawled over them. Dr. Allison's wardrobe was by Pierre Cardin, the credits said.

Welch leaned over and pushed the button. His hand brushed the hairy, physical leaves of the African violets and appreciated the sensation. Over on the glider, still gently rocking, his mother lay floating among the brown fish and asleep. Foster sat up straight and alert in his chair, smiling a little over the bittersweet ending to the coronary case.

Welch's hand still tingled from the touch of the furry leaves; he stretched it over and laid it against Foster.

"How's my moby dick? How's my big white whale? Is it getting big, bigger, biggest? Is it ready to let old captain Welch chase it through the deep water? Is it ready?"

Foster blushed, but was annoyed. He had hoped that

the mood Dr. Allison always brought upon him would last much longer today. But it was as usual: Welch was dragging, as usual, his delicate highmindedness back to earth.

"Sometimes I wish, sugar..." Foster began; but Welch pressed harder than ever with his hand.

"Be-<u>loved</u>. I love you. All in the world I want to do is invite you upstairs for a nice long cool bath to pass away the heat of the day, and then it'll be almost time for the news to come on."

"Have you ever thought your mother might not be asleep? Oh, Welch, I love you, too!"

After they had gone, Miss Nina opened her eyes. The room was smoother, thicker than ever with greenness. The afternoon would last forever. She raised herself on an elbow and smiled and nodded into all the room's corners. She began her favorite afternoon game. She was Madame Recamier lying graceful as a white bird on her chaise longue of striped silk. Her little feet barely peeped out from among the infinite ruffles of her dress. Her hair was dressed into a pile of little curls; her eyelids drooped from the direct stares of her eager lovers. With countless smiles and half-smiles, her rounded lips punctuated her delicious wit. All

around her they sat, balancing the Sevres cups, letting the tea grow cold while they drank in the sweeter brew of her conversation.

Miss Nina actually knew nothing of Madame Recamier, was even unsure of her century, her lovers, her intelligence. All she really knew, and, obviously, as she told herself frequently, this was quite enough, was that Recamier was Parisian. It was so much better to know nothing but a name and a city. One of the shapes around Miss Nina took a face and a form; it bent close to her.

"Leonard Bernstein," Miss Nina whispered, holding out her hand for a kiss. "I can tell you're tiring of that tea. Reach into that cabinet and bring out that Napoleon brandy, pour yourself a glass. Napoleon himself gave it to me, pressed it in my hands that night he died in my arms here at Versailles. How good it feels to be back home in Versailles... to have you all here to welcome me home!"

Miss Nina allowed the kissed hand to drop. Bending over, she reached far beneath the glider and pulled out a shabby plaid book bag. The ink on the name tag had been caught in the rain too many times; but Miss Nina could still read it: Ellen Fairbanks, Sixth Grade, Miss Jennings.

"This is the one," said Miss Nina. She fumbled with the buckles and had to sit up to open it properly, to prevent a terrible accident; but she found everything as safe as she

had left it. The sticky wine glass, engraved with loops of flowers and ribbon, was uncracked, still tucked into its thick gingham napkin from the kitchen. The brandy bottle was still half full. Miss Nina drank the first glass quickly, then leaned again on her elbow to sip a second slowly and resume her conversation.

"It is good, isn't it, Leonard? Drink up! There's always more down in the basement where August left it all for me to finish." Miss Nina smiled again at the face she saw. "Leonard, I declare I don't know what I'll do with you if you dedicate one more symphonic masterwork to me! How people are talking! Talk, talk, talk, and this whole town talks in French. They talk about me all in French, so beautifully... very beautifully."

Suddenly, without warning, Miss Nina remembered. The little glass dropped from her hand and spilled and smashed on the tiled floor. But before she could cry out, she realized that it didn't matter. In Paris she would not need it.

"Dear heaven, dear heaven! How could I forget... it was the damnable TV--but no TV in Paris, no TV in Paris or ever again. I've got to hurry."

She left the bottle uncorked beside the broken glass. Already, the room's thick greenery was fattening itself on scent of brandy. The violet leaves stretched toward it. It overwhelmed the vague, ancient odors that crept from the

bookbag, still open and flapping its buckles across the glider: of peanut butter, waxed paper, ink, marbled-cover composition books.

The bathroom door, unlocked this time; and through the lavender-coated steam, Welch at one end of the huge, lion-clawed tub, Foster at the other, in bubbles up to their chins, their eyes staring dreamily, drowsily at each other; a tray of triangular, crustless sandwiches filled with chive cheese and cucumber slices, and glasses of iced tea, the ice melted to the thinness and transparency of fingernails.

"Dunk your head, sugar, and get that smell out."

Foster dunked his head and came up with bubbles popping around his mouth and nostrils.

"I wonder who in the world could have pissed on your head... I've heard of things like that... you better not let me catch you... dry your hand off and pass me a sandwich, and you eat one."

Foster dried his hand. He and Welch began eating the sandwiches and wondering what they'd do with themselves when this was over.

"Get up from there, my dear boys, my sweet boys!"

Miss Nina appeared in the room's vapor, thinner, less

substantial than the hot steam. Rushing up the stairs, she had stepped on the hem of her dress, had torn it at the waist. Her hip bone jutted toward her son's face, as definite, as ill-clothed in flesh as a skeleton's.

Welch watched the bone for a moment, remembered that he had once been inside that woman with that bone and suddenly felt very protective toward it.

"Mama, you have simply got to eat more. Beloved, dry your hand and pass mama one of the sandwiches. Pass her two of the sandwiches."

Foster dried his hand and reached for the tray.

"Food be damned!" Miss Nina shouted. "I don't want to have to say it a second time. I need your muscled arms to get my wardrobe trunk up the stairs; I need your brains and imagination to keep me cheerful and delighted until my plane is airborne. Who knows? I may break down and start to cry for the sight of my old home and embarrass the both of you to death at the airport. But I doubt it. No, I have no two doubts about it! Get up! I've wasted too much time already."

Welch and Foster stared hard at each other through the bubbles; they stopped chewing.

"Where're you going, mama?"

"To Paris, of course, to the man who loves me more than all others, the man who kissed me one whole long afternoon up to the elbow, every single button. I'm going to my

happiness, you double-damned fool! Get up!"

"Turn your back, mama."

"Nonsense!"

"I won't until you turn your back."

Miss Nina turned, bracing herself against the room's heat on the sink. Through the medicine chest mirror she could see her son rise from the water, his whole body as covered with foam as a mad dog's mouth.

She had closed her eyes as the bus regained its speed and rolled away. She would not open them, and Ludie, not caring that she wouldn't, led her by the hand, protecting her darkness from all visible danger, back into the house.

When they reached the kitchen, Ludie used her free hand to draw the shades on all six windows, covering the room in dim, washed-out yellow. Finally, she used the hand to turn the stove off. The low, blue-burning flames beneath the pots popped and went out.

"Nobody ever eats here anymore anyway," said Ludie. "Cooking is just a habit."

Ellen was led a little more through her own darkness, and then the little chintz-covered couch that had been parked long ago beneath the cabinets for Ludie's afternoons was be-

neath her; and then Ludie's lap was beneath her head.

"You can open your eyes now."

Ellen opened her eyes, but there was nothing to see but the four scarred legs of the oak table far across the room. Ellen felt glad to see them. Ludie's hand was soft across one of her cheeks; the cheap satin of Ludie's scratched and made miserable the other.

"I thought he was dead," Ludie began. "I thought he was dead. I saw them, myself, pick up that coffin and carry it to the hearse and I saw them, myself, unload it and put it in a hole so deep he could never get back through. And I waited until the hole was covered and packed firm and tight before I came back home. I was so sure. I stayed and watched every move they made, pulling the straps back up, filling all the dirt in, packing it down, getting all those flowers on top. I said to him, That's all for you, mister. You'll never catch another woman to leave with a wall-eyed baby after your pleasure's gone. You are dead and gone and your pleasure's done with you. And me and every woman you ever drove crazy with dreams are, praise the Lord, still here to tell about it, but not you. No more, not you. Ludie is so dumb, baby, how can she be so dumb?" The hand left her cheek and moved across her hair, the fingers tightening against the snarls. "With all I knew, I should have known that kind of thing is never dead. They can't never cover all that up

tight enough. It'll pretend to be dead, then lay low for a while, then burst out of its own dirt and catch the innocent babe and the brazen hussy again and again. My poor baby, he caught you too."

Ludie's body shook beneath Ellen. She looked up to watch her tears come down, but there were no tears to see. Ludie's face was clenched with fury.

"That's right. You sit up now. We're going to plan for you like I planned for me a long time ago."

Ellen saw the yellow shades darkening, quickly, one by one, around the room. Thunder was roaring distantly and coming closer. The shades flapped away from the windows, and the kitchen began to cool. She realized that there was no need to say, It was not your old lover, my father, my miserable ghost. It is very possible that Nameless Soldier's name was Roger. Heavy feet jumped the last few steps and began running down the back hall toward them. Welch looked at them from the door.

"There you are," he panted. "When the doctor gets here, Ludie, you let him in and tell him upstairs. In the meantime, you get yourself up there and help."

"Help what?" asked Ludie. She put an arm around Ellen.

"Don't ask questions, fool nigger!" Welch screamed. "My mama's trying to go to Paris!" Welch was naked except

for a rose-figured towel tied around his waist. His body was sticky with soap. He turned and ran back through the hall.

"They ought to let her go. Don't leave me, Ludie."

"I won't leave you. Yes, they ought to let her go." She sighed, sat up as straight as the slippery chintz would allow and cleared her throat. "Across town," she said, "I have a Black Power boyfriend. He is so full of books and ideas he's got an ulcer to show for it. I've had him not long since the funeral, and he loves me, and I love him as much as I can any black man, especially any black man that wears an African bathrobe instead of pants. He is an angel. He is going take me away from all this, and V.B., too, and..." Ludie's face became embarrassed, became a richer brown from the red that flooded into it.

"And me too?" Ellen wanted to know, whined like the baby inside her. The baby whined through her. "Ludie, don't leave me."

"He says youall're artyfacts of our society and it's time I stopped cleaning and scrubbing and cooking and nursing white artyfacts and do it for Black Power. I love you. I'll make him take you because he wants to eat as good as white people and that means me." Ludie stood up very quickly, shaking Ellen off her, brushing crumbs away. Ellen had become amazingly light, collapsing into the chintz like a feather descended to earth at the same speed as a stone's. The extra

pinprick of flesh inside her made no difference except to unburden her of her own weight.

"Go upstairs and lock yourself up and don't hear a single sound of hurt that might happen in this house until I come for you. Tonight's the night we go. Don't hear anything until you hear me knock."

At one o'clock the next morning, a morning pale rather than dark as it should have been, Ellen and Ludie stood beneath the thicker black of the trees waiting for the Black Power boyfriend, as they had earlier waited for the bus. They stood in a circle of four suitcases that reminded them both of the houses and castles and fortresses made of wood bricks in which Ellen and Margaret had spent many, many hours of their lives. Their feet nudged the sidewalk, feeling for the heavy quilt that had sometimes made the roof of the castle and sometimes had made a bed for the house. Ellen held Ludie's hand tightly and would not let go: when Ludie felt that she had to adjust her hat, Ludie used her left hand and Ellen used her right to set it straight. They did not look up and down the street for the heavy red Chevrolet they were waiting for, but, instead, kept their eyes on the house, which spread and shimmered before them like unlifelike buttermilk unbottled

into a dark blue bowl, seeing the house for the last time. Nature, with a radiant summer night, made it quiver; or else, it was splintering, flying apart at all seams with Miss Nina's silenced insanity. Miss Nina had shrieked at her son and called him Avis as he lay beside her and imprisoned her against her own bed; and, in the next breath, she had moaned to Beloved, at her other side, "Oh, my dear, Oh my dear, can you still love me, even with my naked hands?" And when the doctor had come, she had screamed so loudly "Paris, Paris, Paris!" that all who heard her really believed they had been transported away across an ocean and were strolling the Champs Elysees in a flowering springtime with a beautiful woman. She had been injected with something. When she woke again, Welch would know how to inject her with more of it. Ludie and Ellen could see the light still burning fiercely through her room's shades and could feel her unconsciousness dimming her light as she lay, dead to the world, a pile of tiny, nightgowned bones and nothing more.

Ellen was no longer light as a feather; she had become lighter than air and, without Ludie's hand, would soon have shot through the roof of the universe becoming, at last, nothing, as the child inside her nibbled the last marrow from the last bone and drank the last drop of blood and sank to earth alone, a full-bodied, full-weighted man who had grown strong and six-footed on Ellen's flesh. She held Ludie's

hand tightly enough to hurt her.

"Venusberg'll be late," Ellen whispered.

"No, she won't. She just had to leave a letter on your mama's pillow. It's her last prophecy because my boyfriend won't have it because he says second-sight is niggery. You better hush, they'll hear you."

In the yard before them, May-Ellen, every strand of hair visible, every dress wrinkle a chasm in the glare of Welch's flashlight, bent over her flower beds chunking bricks on to the grass and replacing them with the mille-fiori paperweights her husband had given her. Beloved, also on his knees, went behind her, brushing the crumbs of dirt from the paperweights with Ludie's old pastrybrush. Ludie and Ellen could hear Welch say, over and over, "Sister, Beloved, the yard's tacky enough without this. How much more do I have to stand!" but he kept the beam of the flashlight steady and the other two, busy with great usefulness, did not answer.

A rustle among the trees became Venusberg and then three were in the waiting circle. Venusberg was too shy to look up at Ellen; Ellen seemed not to see her or feel her there, but Venusberg was convinced that Ellen would reach out and touch her very soon. Venusberg was convinced that their trip would end in a place where she and Ellen would do nothing but make love and that her mother had become a bridesmaid. Venusberg thought she could make the kissing begin.

"You better hurry and kiss your mama goodbye," she told Ellen. "I hear a car coming now."

"Hush! crazy baby," Ludie answered her. "You've forgot they're not supposed to know we're gone until morning when they get our letters for breakfast instead of breakfast. You hear?"

At last Ellen said, "I ought to burn it all down before I go, then they all can get out."

"Somebody'll probably do it for you," Ludie said.

And then the car came, silently, and waited for them to tiptoe to it two houses down the street. The train to the North was waiting.

Gritty with either terror or sand--there was no sense in the effort to decide which--Margaret stood in the phone booth and forced herself to compress more and more of the sweating air into her lungs. Trembling, she would surely dial all the wrong numbers, lose the silver coins to a stranger's voice or to the wadded, petrified gobs of chewed gum and beach trash that made the floor of her upright coffin. She thought of it as an upright coffin, a glass box to keep her dead self, like a saint, on view to the public and away from the salted little crushes of the bay's waves against

the shore. If she were calm, her fingers would reach Ellen. And Ellen's voice would fold back the glass doors and bring the dead to life.

She dialed, so slowly that the whir of the dial became separated clicks, but so carefully that when the ringing stopped there would be no mistaking the voice of resurrection when it answered and stopped the bell. Already she had lost one of her quarters to the sand; the conversation would be shortened.

She had watched the swan disappear into the haze that veiled, that sometimes lifted and revealed, a rich man's island across the bay then, without a word to herself, had wrapped her legs in a long linen skirt embroidered in butterflies and dragons by Pathways' own hand as Pathways' last gift to her, and had left the beach for the public library to consult the world's telephone books for the name of Ellen. She was neither overjoyed nor shocked to find the name so close to her, practically on her doorstep. Ellen in Brooklyn Heights, New York; Margaret in Bluebay, Long Island, New York --it was nothing a phone call, a few hours couldn't cure. She had gouged the number into the back of her left hand with the librarian's blue ball point and trailed back to the beach to the only public telephone she had noticed in two years.

In Brooklyn Heights the telephone was ringing, then

was answered.

"Hello," said Ellen.

"Hello," said Ellen again.

"I am Margaret." She was choking. The wads of gum, the empty green bottles, the slit beach balls, the roar of motorboats, the sound of water, the yells of Italians all lodged in her throat. Two years' worth of the beach, alone by the water, were choking her.

"I am Margaret. Will you hurry?"

"Where are you? I haven't known in a long time," Ellen answered, cool and at a great height among the stones and greenery of Brooklyn Heights.

Margaret slung the door of the phone booth open and let the beach inside her free ear, the ear that did not hear Ellen's voice. From both sides, the sounds separately rushed her brain and met in its center in a tangle or an embrace so loud and full of such extraordinary new noise that when the silver money ran out and she had let the phone drop from her hand she could not remember her own voice talking and telling Ellen how to find her. But when she picked up her skirt with fingers so brown they were like tree limbs and started for her house she was sure that she was starting for home to wait for Ellen.

The taxi driver, in the most youthful, blackest part of the new morning, let Ellen out at the street's corner. Go down that long road, watch out for ruts and big stones, and at the end there'll be the right house, the last house, the house nearest the water, said the driver. It's nothing but a shack, said the driver. Who could live there? said the driver. The driver yawned. It had been the last train to Oyster Bay to meet that night, and the drive from Oyster Bay had been long. Ellen paid him and would not answer and let him go.

She moved to the center of the road and looked down it. Its ending merged into a silver, horizontal needle of water that connected two black shapes that faced each other across the road, two black shapes that could be houses. The moon rose above it all, an ordered swirl of round light, a ghost of the heat that shook above the white, sandy road, that festered in the Italian gardens all around and stung Ellen's nose with harsh vegetable smells that climbed and crawled and sprouted, readying green and red food to minister to another day's hunger.

After the phone had gone dead, without any goodbye at all, Ellen had made the greatest effort and forced herself into stillness, insisted that her hand keep itself from

flinging the door wide, insisted that her legs keep themselves from running faster than they ever had. She forced herself into stillness, back flat against her room's only furnishing, a wide mattress that lay huge, curved and unsupported against the bare floor. She lay on it, conscious that now was the last time she would have to. The room was coffin-shaped; no other word or point of view could make it less so. So long it could have buried a twenty-foot man, so narrow the corpse would have had to lie on his side, the room was made of white plaster and oak floor and three thick glass windows that made a sharp-angled bay at one end. Ellen's bed was head-first among the windows, and she lay on it, and the sun came through the glass and sat on her face.

Blinded with sun, Ellen could think of where she was going and how to go there; blinded and thinking, Ellen did not have to notice the room's empty end, the empty foot of the coffin. Down there, the little boy with the head of thick dark-red hair, the little boy with the one blue eye that had seemed determined to shift into a gaze against walls, down there the little boy, Ellen's son, had slept at night in a white crib and had acted out endless peaceable games and fantasies.

"Batman! Batman!" Diggory would growl all his second year, quietly, whispery, so that his sleepy, very sleepy mama would not wake from the curly lump she made almost all day

long beneath the silky quilt. Diggory would pummel the thin air about him with his fists, save his city, ruin the villains until the next time they awoke around him. The television set, from a shadowed corner of the room, would answer him, quietly, whispery in the guffaws of clowns and the chitter-chatter of Bugs and Porky and the speeding Road Runner. Diggory would kneel close to the darting, leaping, speaking little drawings and smear the glass tube with his fingerprints, longing to get his hands on them and touch them all over. Between bowls of soup and bread and butter and short sleeps in front of the blue glare, Diggory showed his life to his darlings until late, when dark was deepening all their room and the images on the screen were becoming adult and fearsome, until he heard his mother sigh and stir beneath the rustling silk and heard her fingers turn a page of the book that lay beside her head. Then Diggory would leap on her with hugs that sent his elbows gouging into her breasts, with kisses so soft and wet that his mama shivered. "I love you, mama," Diggory would whisper, to keep her sleepy, and his mama would answer, "Love me? I love you too, Diggory"; and then Diggory would curl into the very warm depths of the place where his mother had spent her sleep and pin her arms to him; and then Diggory would sleep too until sometime much later in the darkness he would feel his eyes half-open, would feel his fingers touch the slats of his crib and hear the

footsteps of one big man or another tiptoe past him to greet his mother and take his place beside her beneath the silky quilt.

When she reached the end of the sandy road, the water before Ellen was no longer a sharp needle but a flat hand stretched out like a gypsy's palm letting the moon's silver cross it. She turned to look at the house. It leaned, salt-bleached, broken, and guarded by the beach growths of thorns and weeds, out to her.

There was Margaret sitting on the porch, her hair still flat and gold and long crouching against her face. She wore a long evening dress, of net, that seemed green in the moonlight. She sat on the bottom step with her bare feet packed about with sand to make the frog-houses that children used their feet for when they are tired of swimming.

Ellen dropped her straw satchel into the weeds and sat down next to her.

"Even here in the dark," said Margaret, "I can see that your hair is cut and looks trashy; you're thinner and bony in cheap clothes; your legs need shaving. Your face has lines in it."

Ellen leaned and pulled back a handful of her hair, then touched, barely grazed, Margaret's cheek with her lips.

Margaret looked down at her buried feet, stuck her big toes up through the mounds to make small private entrances

to the frog-houses for the baby frogs.

"All right," said Margaret. "The Soldier Boy?"

"I don't know where. My mother wrote a long time ago that he had come looking for me."

"That woman?"

Ellen laughed. The weeds rustled back at her. "She spent all her money on a song, without even a dime left over for a drop of whiskey. Somewhere she does nothing but give singing lessons. My mother wrote me a long time ago that she had come looking for me."

"And me?"

"I heard you were a scandal. I heard that Mr. Pathways' mother came and took him home."

The taffeta beneath the green net rustled. Margaret was standing up and twirling her dress around and around in the watery light, breaking up the frog-houses.

"That's right," she said. "Now I remember. She was a wonderful lady who came busting in at 3 AM one morning (just like you've done just now), all in long tight black satin, and pearls at the neck and pearls to the elbows all as big as your knuckles; she came busting in and threw herself on the bed between us and one of my ankles got cut horribly by her high heel, but just by accident. She took my face in her hands and kissed me and said, 'I wish I'd had you instead of him, but I believe in facing reality. Now

that I've got such a swinger in the family, it's home to mama for son.' She said she'd got a fix on him right in the middle of the third act of Aida in Atlanta and without wasting another minute had flown herself out of there to be at his side. She made me take the key to this house because it revealed her humble beginnings which I now deserved and wrote me a check for one thousand dollars. So I came here."

Margaret, standing still, blocked a good half of the moon so that Ellen could believe in the man in the moon. She held out her arms.

"I've been in this dress," she said, "for hours and hours waiting for someone to dance with me. Do it now." They fell, in a tangled, hurtful embrace, down the wooden steps to the beach. They danced, joggling and crooked, in circles against each other, like wierd, deformed children let out only at night to spare the public's sensibilities.

Off the beach and in the house, Ellen could not tell whether morning was coming or whether the moon was shining brighter. The room's windows were painted black in thick, harsh tempera. She panted heavily from the dancing but was afraid to sit or lean. She felt, through the blackness, an enormous clutter crowding toward her. Inside, there was nothing left of the seawater, of the bouncing moon that had rocked on when their dance was over, nothing left of the night and its announcements that had come in the shape of shells, in

the dribble of wavelets sliding underneath their arches, in the whizz of wind through Margaret's hair, announcements that were made into cryptic indecipherable code by the moon's glare.

They were inside pitch black without a clue.

"Light a light," Ellen whispered. "This dark is killing me."

Before she had finished speaking, the match flared, the great circle of orange took hold and grew and wound around the room. As the light spread, it made everything clear. The glassed-in look from the huge bear's eyes met the painted vacancy in the rocking-horse's stare. A huddle of dolls, with bisque faces and pleated caps watched them from the floor, their dim mouths unable to smile. Everywhere in the candlelight, the toys hung and sprawled, marched, sat, lay. Wooden blocks, their edges worn smooth, their alphabet worn to gibberish, hundreds of them, had been built into a little cave with an entrance shuttered by a thin flannel blanket.

Ellen drew a deep breath that tasted of the salt their dance by the seawater had lodged in her nostrils. Sputtering candle grease seemed to lie on her tongue and weigh it down. All the things she had decided about Margaret, only minutes before, were dead wrong--that the lime-green evening dress above the bare feet was simply an eccentric

gesture made to amuse her; that the dance by the water was a conscientious effort to symbolize the ring-around-the-rosy duets of their infancy, the zany, baby maypoles of their kindergarten time. Ellen stared into the light, insisting that her tongue move. But the truth stuck in her throat: the same thing that had made her tired and drab, hut and grief-stricken, but still human, still able to laugh at and covet reality had turned her dear Margaret into a fairy monster. The thing was neither loveless sex nor sexual love. It was something like a thick and twisting vine that grew between the two, sucking on the abounding sustenance of the earth, sprouting leaves and flowers in sun- and oxygen-rich atmosphere and, when it was strong and able enough, wrapping its arms about the two mysteries standing beside it, bringing them in close so that they, along with the worms, could feast on the vine's fruit; so that they, along with mockingbirds, could build nests and sing songs in the vine's greenery. Ellen imagined that the vine's name was Falling-in-love. She turned warily to look at the pretty face glowing at her through the candlelight. It shone equally with insanity and beauty, not a day older, unimpressed by any pain, brilliant with eternal childhood. The thing that had brought Ellen to consciousness had made Margaret mad.

Ellen wondered what love it was that had driven Margaret crazy. Then, so tired that the fact brought her no

shock, she realized that it was herself whom Margaret loved insanely.

Margaret twirled around the toys, kissing them, hugging them, straddling her rocking horse and rocking it fiercely, making the old nag's wood creak fiercely between her thighs. She babbled as she rocked.

"When I came to the last of the wonderful lady's money, I got so frightened that I hurried to spend it all quickly and get it over with! I saw a poster at the beach, the very moment I became afraid, about an auction at a great huge marvelous house only a little walk from here, so I went, and when the toys came out no one wanted the toys, so they took the fifty dollars and brought me all the toys here to my house. I've been very happy ever since."

Ellen slipped to the floor and leaned into the arms of the dusty bear. The candle sputtered and made Margaret seem to shake above her galloping horse.

The bear was friendly, with a torso that was soft but firm. Ellen fought to keep her eyes open and on the dizzy ride in front of her.

"When did you last eat, darling?" Ellen whispered.

"Oh, lots and lots!" the golden-headed horseman called back. "Anytime I want to!"

Ellen forced herself to her feet. A second candle lay by the first. She lighted it and held it carefully before her

as she went into the room beyond the toys. Except for a sagging cot covered with sandy, grimy sheets, it was empty. Her feet shuffled through dust, but the windows were unpainted and the vision of the white moon over the white water was open to her eyes. In the third and final room was a pot-bellied wood stove, a rusting, bone-dry sink, and countless cans of beans and hash, so old that they definitely dated from the time of the wonderful lady's humble beginnings. The empty cans had been thrown in a corner where they lay in a jumble with old coke bottles.

Margaret was still astride her horse, her long legs bending, her toes pressed back against the floor, her head against the wooden one. The ride was finished, but the girl was still awake. On her mouth there was a delighted smile; her eyes danced. They seemed to dance with pleasure, but when Ellen looked closely into them, she saw not dancing but the tireless spinning of two metallic blue tops. Ellen put her hand against Margaret's shoulder, then let it fall slowly down the beautiful naked arm; it was like trailing her hand through warm water, and she had to resist the impulse to follow her hand, dive clear to the bottom.

"Will you watch me play dolls now?"

Ellen retreated to the huge bear. "Yes, go ahead."

Margaret began undressing the old, little dolls, and wrapping them in pieces of blanket and holding them each for

a little while in her rocking arms. When each doll had been put to sleep, she nestled it in her net lap and stayed very still to let it dream in peace.

"Tell me a story," she said.

There was only one story that she could remember, so Ellen began to tell it.

"I used to have," she said, "a little child that was alive. His hair was thick and dark red. His skin was very white and his eyes were very blue, although one eye did odd things and reminded me often of other things. He lived with me in the room in Brooklyn Heights, high in the attic of a thick brownstone house with windows that looked far, far down into a garden filled with flowers for every season and the statues of goddesses. Every night after I put the little boy in his crib, one of three men would come and fuck me. When the man left, he would give me money so that I could pay for our room and buy the little boy things to eat. One day, he wanted more than food, he wanted a white wooly dog with a red smile for a mouth. When I took it out of the store and gave it to him, he began to love the dog passionately. He loved it as much as he loved me, passionately. One afternoon during the winter we played a game in the garden. He closed his eyes and put his head against a goddess' skirts to give me time to hide in the bushes with the little dog. When I called <u>ready</u>!, he began darting to and fro among the

bushes, shivering and laughing, half in love with, half scared to death of the moment when the little dog and I would leap barking and growling from the bush and throw ourselves into his arms. After our game, late that night, a blizzard came, and then one of the men came so drunk he was stupid and left all the house doors half open. And then sometime while the man was still there, my little boy woke up. He must have watched us, but if he spoke or cried I could not hear him. He wanted his dog, but it was in the garden where we had forgotten it after the game. When I found him in the morning, he and the wooly dog were frozen against the same goddess that had let him hide his eyes in her skirt during the afternoon. When I pulled him to me, the skin of his palms and head ripped off and stayed stuck to her icy stone."

Ellen shoved the bear's thick paw into her mouth to silence herslef.

"I'm so sleepy," said Margaret. "You promised to sleep with me in the castle I made. Do it now."

"We're too big now, darling."

"You promised!"

Ellen blew the candle out and began crawling into Margaret's wooden dream. The room was so dark the toys could see nothing.

"Once," said Ellen, finishing her story into the ears of the toys, or of the night, "before the dog, I bought him

a ten-cent harmonica. All the night long, ever so often, he would wake and play it. He would suck and spit the notes out. It was marvelous and odd to hear music that I seemed to recognize sometimes coming out of the darkness from the end of my bed. Occasionally, when I felt like it, I made words for the tune and changed it into a song."

The Southern Railway jolted, then simmered to a stop. Outside their coach window, Ellen watched heat pile on heat in shimmering transparent layers. The depot and the snail-motions of the glum redcaps wavered like fish in water, and the grimy thickness of glass through which Ellen saw the scene became the polluted surface of its pond... It is only because I am exhausted, Ellen told herself, and ready to screech out loud and wake up in the arms of some comforter from this bad dream. But what she saw from the window was what she saw--a hybrid of night and day that seemed like water; and in the water were things and people that should have been on flat, unwavering dry land.

There was nothing wet insdie. With every human shuffle, dust burst from rough nap of the chairs, golden-tinted dust from cloth the color of American Beauty rosebuds, causing the passengers to choke on their conversations. But the

conversations had stopped hours and miles back; and now, in their hurry from chair to door, the passengers were trying to stifle even their choking. Margaret had caused the silence. A nice trip; I'm going to take you on a nice long trip and at the end of it you will be so happy... Ellen had told Margaret; and Ellen was forced to carry the bear and pack the dolls and drag a pasteboard carton heavy with wooden blocks by a string that sliced her palms, her hands turned into meat on the plate of Margaret's journey home. And Ellen was forced to bear Margaret's screaming tantrum while she skinned the salt and sand and knots from her hair, was forced to rip the long green net from her back and trap Margaret into a dress so old, so completely abandoned that its shoulders were rimmed with many years' worth of red rust from the hanger it had hung on behind the kitchen door. It was a dress from some woman's humble beginnings but good enough to button respectably and good enough for Margaret's journey home.

There was nothing wet inside the train but Margaret, although all around her was as gnarled and bone-dry as a dead oak, dead but not dead enough to fall; Ellen, the dryest, the most gnarled of all. After only a little while from Pennsylvania Station, Margaret had begun her true journey home by wiggling, quick as a wink, out of her white underpants and sighing with the satisfaction a snake must feel

when all the old skin is gone. Before Ellen could take her and hide her in the seat again, Margaret had jacked her knees to her chin, had parted the folds of her genitals with her browned bones of fingers and had whispered, with a delight that did not communicate itself, "Somebody love me!" to a veiled and stout widowed woman across the aisle. At the sight of the rosy sex, Ellen expected the scent of roses, but all around her, instead, the air collected into the belly of a salted, Atlantic wave, broke over her, and her throat seemed stuffed with seaweed and the fluttering tails of many little fish. The train clanked, roared, shook; all night long the lights in the coach car stayed on. The conductor would not come; no passenger helped when Ellen cried, "Help, help me catch her!", but all of them muttered, laughed, screamed discreetly, and two soldiers grabbed when Margaret, in a barefoot dance across their legs, ripped her respectable buttons off and displayed two breasts the size of demitasse cups, all the while calling, "Somebody love me!" Nobody loved her, but many touched her. Each passenger became, because of Margaret, as private as though the curtains of a sleeper they could not afford were drawn around him; became freed from any world they had left or were going to because they traveled across a blackened nowhere they could not recognize. A glance through any window that night revealed nothing but night and their own images and, behind them, the

reflection of a dancing, naked Margaret. Margaret became the indulgence of as many dreams as there were passengers; and at last the passengers could handle and kiss and violate their own dreams, acts they had never dreamed of doing, not even in their wildest dreams. Toward morning, when most, even Ellen, slept, one of the soldiers took Margaret into the men's lavatory and the other soldier stood guard. While she was gone, the passengers began to smell again, this time through their sleep, the nutty chocolate, the dried sandwich bread, the slick pages of the magazines that had comforted them before Margaret had come. Afterwards the soldier had been good enough to get the girl back into her dress.

It was the last stop; or, a very long stop. Ellen shook the tangled blond head in her lap.

"Wake up now. We're here, we're here."

Margaret looked up at her instantly with the huge, wide-awake stare of the successfully-escaped lunatic.

Ellen was standing, aching and bent, before the house, watching it, hiding herself behind the great green tree that hung over the sidewalk. It was only the first day

of June, only six in the morning, but already it was as hot as an August noon. Margaret had taken only two steps from the taxi's door before she fell, already sleeping, to the sidewalk, curling like a cat on eiderdown around Ellen's feet. The house could not have been expecting them, but it seemed to. The doors and windows stood wide open and something like the smell of bacon collected with the dew over the thick rich green of the grass before her. A black man, all power of any color stripped from him, stood high on a ladder against the house and slowly, efficiently painted it with a new coat of white. Beneath him, leaning in the shrubbery, dozing in the new sun, was Venusberg feeding, from a breast that looked as large as her head, a tiny, tightly-wrapped baby, invisible in a pink blanket. There was a new glider in the yard, set between the twin camellia bushes. In it, gently rocking a shaking, old thing, its chin speckled with brown drool, its thin shape wrapped in the loose starched garment of an old woman, in the glider were Welch and Beloved sipping coffee and watching over the painting. Beloved's legs were crossed; one of his gleaming black boots stuck out so that Ellen could see it, and she could see, through the glider's slats, a black belt, as wide as Beloved's hand, around Beloved's waist. Stretched out at their feet, wearing a gorgeous Japanese robe, scratching a belly become round, yawning, squinting at the sun, was the Nameless Soldier. And soaring above it

all was the voice of Ellen's mother, practicing scales, learning to sing; and with her voice came the dead sober, unremitting sound of the piano accompaniment. Then, abruptly, there was silence above the clinking of the coffee cups, above the steady slap of the painter's brush. And without any warning to her daughter who waited hidden in the sun with her sleeping lunatic, the mother let her voice suddenly burst into a song, "Voi che sapete", the notes breaking, as the voice reached for them, into notions of nobility, exstacy or intrigue; and the piano was there too, exactly beside the voice.

Ellen bent and gathered the sleeping girl into her arms, trying to coax her, teach her to walk in her sleep. As they went toward the house, their scalps burning with the sun, their legs trembling from the effort, it seemed to Ellen that they were approaching theconditions of perfect love.